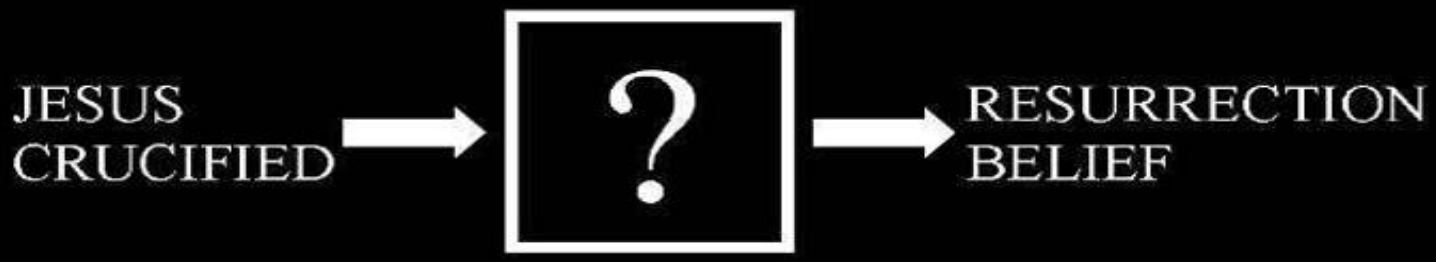
DOUBTING JESUS' RESURRECTION

What Happened in the Black Box?



AN INQUIRY INTO AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION OF CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

KRIS D. KOMARNITSKY

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Doubting Jesus' Resurrection: What Happened in the Black Box?
First Edition (paperback and e-book)
Includes bibliographical references and index
ISBN-13: 978-1-44146-330-2
ISBN-10: 1-44-146330-5

Dedicated to my wife Katherine for her loving companionship, to my children in the hope that they will always think for themselves, to Gene Stecher for his encouragement, and to freethinkers everywhere.

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Introduction

Doubt is an understandable human reaction to the claim that Jesus resurrected from the dead. This is true not only for atheists who logically rule out Jesus' resurrection on the basis that there is no God, but also for those of us who accept the possibility of God. The problem is firsthand personal experience. Many of us have never experienced God intervene within human history in the way suggested by the resurrection, that is, in a *physically direct* way. We now and then hear of an incredible event from someone else, a miracle, but it is never anything we can personally verify. We sometimes experience a confluence of events, but closer examination often reveals those events to be more connected than we thought or indistinguishable from random chance. There are times when we think God should physically and directly intervene in the world, but it does not happen. When there is a big gap between firsthand personal experience and a given claim, there is doubt. From a logic perspective it is simple. When we weigh the evidence for any claim, our personal experience affects the result; it is the first piece of evidence to go on the scale and its weight is equal to the confidence we have so far learned to place in our own experiences.

We see the effect of experience-based doubt toward Jesus' resurrection in two of our nation's founding fathers, both of whom believed in God. Thomas Paine declared:

> [Jesus' disciple] Thomas did not believe the resurrection; and, as they say [in the gospels], would not believe, without having occular and manual demonstration himself. *So neither will I*; and the reason is equally as good for me and for every other person, as for Thomas.[1]

Thomas Jefferson took scissors and paste to the Bible creating his own *Jefferson Bible*... without the resurrection in it. Although many people are not as skeptical as Paine and Jefferson, experience-based doubt has at the very least caused many people to honestly ask, could there be something

other than Jesus' resurrection that plausibly explains the evidence before us?

Many defenders of Jesus' resurrection insist there is not. For example, one prominent scholar says:

> The [discovered] empty tomb and the "meetings" with Jesus, when combined, present us with not only a *sufficient* condition for the rise of early Christian belief, but also, it seems, a *necessary* one. Nothing else historians have been able to come up with has the power to explain the phenomena before us.[2]

Another leading traditional scholar rules out all alternative explanations for the origin of Christianity and, referring to the events in the gospels, defines the parameters for any future challenge to the resurrection this way: "Any adequate historical hypothesis about the resurrection must explain four facts: Jesus's honorable burial, the discovery of his empty tomb, his post-mortem appearances, and the origin of the disciples' belief in his resurrection."[3] These arguments from the traditional side of scholarship have filtered down to and been expressed very successfully by laymen as well, one notable example being Lee Strobel in his best selling book *The Case for Christ*. Strobel, an award winning legal editor for a major newspaper who documented his conversion to Christianity proclaimed, "I was ambushed by the amount and quality of the evidence that Jesus is the unique [resurrected] Son of God.... I had seen defendants carted off to the death chamber on much less convincing proof!"[4]

Ultimately, what one decides about Jesus' resurrection depends on what one makes of the gospels. In simple terms, traditional scholarship argues that the canonical gospels are each historically reliable and that as a group they form a powerful combination of independent attestation of events. In contrast, non-traditional scholarship (those who do not believe Jesus rose from the dead in the traditionally understood sense) argues that none of the gospels can be considered historically reliable and none are *truly* independent from the others because later gospels could have drawn from previously written gospels and/or a common pool of oral traditions. The most controversial example of this second view is probably in the works of the *Jesus Seminar*, a group of over 100 scholars who have concluded that about 85% of the words and deeds of Jesus in the gospels

are later legendizations about him.[5] Many accuse the Jesus Seminar of having a bias against the supernatural, of being skeptical of the historical trustworthiness of the gospels simply because they are too riddled with events like walking on water, a virgin birth, foretelling the future, instantaneously changing water into wine, etc. But what is really wrong with such a bias? Without unequivocal confirmation for any of these miracles, isn't experience-based doubt legitimate grounds for considering the *possibility* that these events could be legends? If so, the only thing the Jesus Seminar is guilty of is taking this possibility to its logical conclusion — if these events are legends, then the gospels are primarily ideologically and apologetically driven documents, which in turn increases the likelihood that other events in the gospels are also fictions driven by ideology and apologetics. The result inverts the burden of proof — instead of treating events in the gospels as historically reliable unless there are strong indications otherwise, events in the gospels are considered historically unreliable unless there are strong indications otherwise.

With the exception of a brief essay on myth growth rates in the appendix, this book will not attempt to tackle the voluminous topic of gospel reliability or the degree of their interdependence and so it is not nor does it pretend to be a comprehensive assessment of Jesus' resurrection. Instead, this book will take what I think is a unique approach, coming at the problem from the other direction and in the end coming back to the question of what to make of the gospels.

This book will begin by looking at just one gospel tradition in isolation, the discovered empty tomb tradition. This tradition is unique in that it is not itself a supernatural event and so any associated bias is not a factor, and it is a tradition upon which the resurrection of Jesus stands or falls. Using only the literary evidence for this tradition, it will be argued that there is good reason to conclude it is a legend.

Following up on this possibility, this book will then move on to a much more basic question that automatically follows. This question can be introduced by looking at what the Apostle Paul wrote to one of his Christian congregations about 20 years after Jesus' death:

> For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third

> day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. (1 Corinthians 15:3-7)

Based on other literary evidence, the beliefs and traditions stated by Paul here are thought by all of traditional scholarship and much of non-traditional scholarship to have been passed on to him only two to five years after Jesus' death, well before any of the gospels were written. Because of this, 1 Cor 15:3-7 is by far the most valuable piece of evidence we have of early Christian beliefs and traditions, and it leads to an interesting historical question: If the discovered empty tomb tradition is a legend and Jesus did not resurrect from the dead, what then caused the rise of the beliefs and traditions we see in 1 Cor 15:3-7? This book is the result of an inquiry into this specific question.

The type of problem we are tackling here is similar to that described by a highly respected researcher from another field of study. This researcher (Jim Collins) was trying to determine the elusive root causes of corporate success. He likened his investigation to trying to determine what is in a black box when given the input and output of the box but limited direct evidence of what is actually in it, and he described the process of his investigation this way:

> [It was] an iterative process of looping back and forth, developing ideas and testing them against the data, revising the ideas, building a framework, seeing it break under the weight of evidence, and rebuilding it yet again. That process was repeated over and over, until everything hung together in a coherent framework of concepts.[6]

That same process was used here except that in our case Jesus' crucifixion is the input that went into the black box and the output is the beliefs and traditions we see in 1 Cor 15:3-7.

What Happened in the Black Box?

This book will not present the iterative process that was used when trying to figure out what happened in the black box; it will present only the final coherent framework of concepts. Similarly, this book will not present the many different ways that the various pieces of evidence can be understood; it will present just one plausible way to interpret each piece of evidence and one plausible way to connect them together into an overall coherent explanation.

Our highly respected management researcher also mentions one of the most important clues in his investigation, which occasionally comes up in ours as well:

> In the Sherlock Holmes classic *The Adventure of Silver Blaze*, Holmes identified "the curious incident of the dog in the night-time" as the key clue. It turns out that the dog did nothing in the nighttime and *that*, according to Holmes, was the curious incident, which led him to the conclusion that the prime suspect must have been someone who knew the dog well. In our study, what we *didn't* find — dogs that we might have expected to bark but didn't — turned out to be some of the best clues to the inner workings of good to great ["good to great" referring to the success of companies].[7]

A plausible non-traditional explanation for the rise of the beliefs and traditions in 1 Cor 15:3-7 comes full circle and impacts on the historical reliability of the gospels. This is because 1 Cor 15:3-7 is used by traditionalists as "external evidence" for the historical reliability of the gospels. As Craig Blomberg, a leading defender of gospel reliability says:

> Paul in fact displays a fairly detailed knowledge of the Gospel traditions if one reads him carefully....[The] awareness of these details is a significant confirmation of the early existence of the

> traditions that went into the formation of the Gospels....Perhaps the most spectacular example of Paul's early familiarity with the historical Jesus appears in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7, with his knowledge of Jesus' death and resurrection....The external evidence for the Gospel traditions reinforces the confidence in their historical reliability...[8]

There is an implicit assumption in Blomberg's use of 1 Cor 15:3-7 to support gospel reliability. It is assumed that the events reported in the gospels — Jesus' honorable burial, the discovery of his empty tomb on the third day after his death, and Jesus' corporeal post-mortem appearances — are the *only* events that could cause the rise of the much more elemental beliefs and traditions expressed in 1 Cor 15:3-7. But if there is another plausible explanation for the rise of these beliefs and traditions, there is nothing about 1 Cor 15:3-7 itself that supports the conclusion that the gospels are more likely historical rather than legendary expansions of these beliefs and traditions.

For those already convinced that the gospels are each historically reliable or that they are truly independent of each other, a non-traditional explanation for 1 Cor 15:3-7 is of little consequence and this book will be of no value to them. However, for those who are not fully convinced of gospel reliability and independence from each other, this book may open up to them a possibility that is suggested by resurrection defender N.T. Wright which, perhaps unintentionally, also reveals the importance of 1 Cor 15:3-7 to the claim that the gospels are historically reliable:

> A good deal of study has been devoted to the task of proposing alternative explanations for the rise of early Christian belief. Any of these, if sustainable, could challenge the argument of the previous section [that *only* a discovered empty tomb and meetings with Jesus could lead to early Christian belief], leaving the Easter stories to be explained as aetiological or apologetic attempts to flesh out a faith arrived at on other grounds.[9]

A traditional cultural commentator cautions in endeavors like this:

> If we cherish the distinctive ideals of Western civilization, and believe as I do that they have enormously benefited our civilization and the world, then whatever our religious convictions, and even if we have none, we will not rashly try to hack at the religious roots from which they spring. On the contrary, we will not hesitate to acknowledge, not only privately but also publicly, the central role that Christianity has played and still plays in the things that matter most to us.[10]

I agree, and in the conclusion of this book I will affirm those things about Christianity that have enormously benefited our world. I will also explain why I think inquiries like this are nevertheless still legitimate and important. As for the main body of this book, my hope is that the reader will find it to be what it is intended to be, an honest historical inquiry not a "rash" or angry attack on Christianity.

Two things have already been presupposed in this book, namely that Jesus existed and that 1 Cor 15:3-7 is not a later editorial insertion into Paul's epistle. Both of these presuppositions are vigorously contested in some quarters of non-traditional scholarship. Needless to say, if either of these two presuppositions are wrong, then this book is on the completely wrong track. In addition to these two presuppositions, the following three are added, the first two being widely accepted, the last one being contested by some in non-traditional scholarship. 1] Around 50-60 C.E. Paul wrote at least the following seven epistles: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon. 2] The Gospel of Mark was written before the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. 3] The belief that Jesus was raised was from the very beginning understood in *bodily* terms, that is, Jesus' followers *believed* that his corpse was gone from its final human resting spot (per Paul's seed/plant analogy in 1 Cor 15:35-54; seed transforms into plant, corpse transforms into spiritual body).

Since much of the material on this subject is complex, several things are worth mentioning that might make reading this book a little easier, even for those who are used to reading such material. First, the endnotes in the back of the book contain *only* bibliographical source information so there is no need to keep flipping to the back of the book to see if the endnotes have further explanation on the main text. Second, various scholars are referred to throughout this book and I do not imagine that

many readers will recognize their names. This is unimportant; the names are used only because they are the easiest way to introduce ideas that have already been formed and they allow the reader to follow up on those ideas if desired. Third, there will be times when it will help to have a bible handy to confirm for yourself that I have not missed the context or meaning of a passage referred to. The fourth and final thing that will make reading this book easier is being clear ahead of time on the approach that is being taken and the structure of the presentation. After arguing that the discovered empty tomb tradition is plausibly a legend, the rest of this book simply steps through all of the questions that *must* be answered in order to get to the beliefs and traditions in 1 Cor 15:3-7 without a discovered empty tomb. It will be argued in each case that every one of these questions has a plausible answer and that together they form an overall plausible answer to what happened in the black box.

Chapter 1

The Discovery of an Empty Tomb, Fact or Fiction?

Whether we are a historian with a PhD, or a just as capably thinking layperson trying to make sense of Christian origins, we have a decision to make when we come to the tradition of the discovered empty tomb — it is either history or it is legend. There are two things in the literary record which suggest it is the latter.

Paul's Silence on the Discovered Empty Tomb

A discovered empty tomb days after Jesus' death should have been a key part of the resurrection message from the very beginning. As seen in the introduction to this book, it is one of the most important pieces of evidence mentioned by defenders of Jesus' resurrection today. Yet the Apostle Paul does not seem to know anything about it.

Since Paul usually wrote to already believing Christian communities, defending Jesus' resurrection was not normally one of his topics. However, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul was writing to one of his more troublesome congregations. The Corinthian congregation was one of his more troublesome groups because of the competing Greek religions there and its over 1000 mile separation from Christian beginnings in Palestine. Immersed in Greco-Roman philosophies, the Corinthians would have had great difficulty with a raised corpse. That this was precisely the part of the resurrection message some of them were having difficulty with is evident in the doubts that some of them expressed, which are repeated by Paul in his letter: "There is no resurrection of the dead.... How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" (1 Cor 15:12, 35).

Although those who expressed these doubts probably doubted both the future general resurrection and Jesus' resurrection, if they somehow saw

Jesus as an exception, they would soon have their doubts about his resurrection because Paul points out the obvious: “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised” (1 Cor 15:13). In either case, Paul is forced to defend Jesus’ resurrection. The highly respected evangelical EBCOT agrees:

> In one of the reports Paul received concerning what was going on in Corinth, he heard that some were claiming “that there is no resurrection of the dead” (1 Cor 15:12)....Paul was so deeply concerned about this theological position that he gave an extended discourse in ch. 15 *to prove the resurrection of Christ* and to set a timetable for the final return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead [emphasis added].[1]

We see Paul’s defense of Jesus’ resurrection in 1 Cor 15:1-19. There, Paul starts out by cautiously reminding the Corinthians that they had previously accepted Jesus’ resurrection:

> Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you — unless you have come to believe in vain. (1 Cor 15:1-2)

Paul then recites a core Christian creed which includes the assertion that Jesus was “raised” and that this has been confirmed in the scriptures (1 Cor 15:3-4). Paul goes on to remind the Corinthians that Jesus appeared to many people, including 500 “at one time”, most of whom “are still alive”, implying that some of them were still available to be asked about their experience (1 Cor 15:5-7). Paul then draws on the influence of authority by asking the Corinthians, “Now if Christ is proclaimed [by all of these people] as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor 15:12). Paul finishes off by going into detail on the consequences if Jesus did not resurrect: “our proclamation has been in vain”, “your faith has been in vain”, we are guilty of “misrepresenting God”, our “faith is futile”, “you are still in your sins”, those Christians who have died have “perished”, and “we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:14-19).

Paul was no amateur at defending ideas. According to John Dominic Crossan:

> Paul [received] a first-class education in the synagogue at Tarsus with a strong emphasis on apologetics for Judaism and polemics against paganism. He was educated... for debates within Judaism...for debates with paganism... [and] for debates within Judaism about paganism.[2]

Given Paul's ability to defend ideas, and given his effort to answer the doubts of the Corinthians about Jesus' resurrection, and then the general resurrection (1 Cor 15:20-57), including a seed/plant analogy that describes how a dead body is raised (1 Cor 15:35-54), it is hard to understand why Paul did not mention a *discovered* empty tomb if he knew about it. It would have been a great bolstering point for Jesus' resurrection and for the future resurrection of all believers, and it is the only piece of major evidence missing from Paul's argument for Jesus' resurrection.

Although the evangelical EBCOT acknowledges that Paul is defending Jesus' resurrection in 1 Corinthian 15, it gives no explanation for Paul's silence on the discovered empty tomb. Of the few traditional commentators that do try to address this issue, the typical response is less than adequate. For example, one traditional scholar says, "[Paul] focuses on resurrection witnesses rather than the empty tomb."[3] But why wouldn't Paul focus on both?

Some say that the buried-raised sequence in 1 Cor 15:4 — "and that he was buried, and that he was raised" — implies a discovered empty tomb. Actually, it only implies the *belief* in an empty burial location. It does not imply a rock-hewn tomb nor does it indicate in any way that Jesus' burial location was actually *discovered* empty. (The circumstances surrounding Jesus' burial and how the belief that Jesus was bodily raised could possibly have come about will be covered later.)

Some say that the third-day reference in 1 Cor 15:4 — "raised *on the third day*" — is referring to a discovered empty tomb. But this idea is just using the gospels to fill in what is not said. While it is a great question to ask what the origin of the third-day belief is, and this will be covered extensively later, it is unbelievable that "on the third day" served as Paul's reference to a discovered empty tomb. No defender of Jesus' resurrection would say just that without mentioning the discovered empty tomb itself.

Some have suggested that the discovered empty tomb was well enough known that it was unnecessary for Paul to explicitly mention it. But if this were true, there would be no reason for Paul to mention any of the basic creed (1 Cor 15:3-4), nor the list of appearances (1 Cor 15:5-7), nor Paul's own appearance (1 Cor 15:8), nor the consequences if Jesus did not resurrect (1 Cor 15:14-19), since all of these too must have been well known to the Corinthians.

Paul's silence on the discovered empty tomb strongly suggests that the discovered empty tomb tradition did not yet exist or that Paul knew it was an emerging legend. As G.W.H. Lampe says:

> If Paul and the tradition which he cites lay no emphasis on the [discovered] empty tomb the question arises whether Paul nevertheless may have known of it. Many New Testament scholars hold that he did. Certainly it would be quite unsafe in the ordinary way, to infer that he did not from the fact that he does not actually allude to it. But in this case I think that the argument from silence has unusual force. For the situation in which Paul wrote I Corinthians 15 was that some of the Corinthians were denying that there is a resurrection of the dead (I Cor 15:12). In answer to them Paul marshals every possible argument, and in particular, he adduces the known fact that Jesus was raised from the dead as the foundation for belief in the future resurrection of Christian people. If Jesus' resurrection is denied, he says, the bottom drops out of the Christian gospel. And the evidence that he was raised consists in the appearances to himself and to others. Had he known that the tomb was found empty it seems inconceivable that he should not have adduced this here as a telling piece of objective evidence.[4]

The Ending to the Gospel of Mark

A second perplexity in the literary evidence also leads to the conclusion that the discovered empty tomb tradition is a legend. Of interest here is the ending to the earliest literary account of the discovered empty tomb, which is also the final sentence in the Gospel of Mark.

In almost all Bibles today, there is a clearly annotated short and long ending to the Gospel of Mark (Mk 16:9 and Mk 16:9-20 respectfully).

Everyone agrees that these endings were not written by Mark. A few scholars think these endings were an honest attempt by later hands to reconstruct an ending that Mark had written. However, it is much more widely accepted, even amongst traditional scholars, that the last sentence in the original Gospel of Mark was chapter 16 verse 8. There are primarily two things which point to this conclusion. One, the earliest surviving manuscripts end at verse 16:8. Two, it goes against the odds of chance that Mark's gospel would get chopped off in a way that is able to produce a complete sentence. As Bruce Metzger says, "...on the basis of good external evidence and strong internal considerations it appears that the earliest ascertainable form of the Gospel of Mark ended with 16.8."[5] Verse 16:8 reads: "[The women] fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

It is extremely puzzling why Mark would end his *entire* gospel with fear induced silence if the women had experienced only an hour or two of numbness and then told others about their incredible discovery of an empty tomb. A representative explanation from the traditional side of scholarship for this strange ending to Mark's gospel comes from Craig Blomberg:

> Mark is writing to Christians who would not likely have come to faith in the first place had they not heard the story of the resurrection. So he can assume knowledge of it and deliberately cut it [his gospel] short to call attention with riveting abruptness to the women's initial fear and failure, knowing full well, and knowing that his audience knew well, the story of how they later overcame their fear and spread the word. Most probably, Mark wants to encourage beleaguered Christians in Rome shortly before or during the Neronic persecution in the 60s that they, too, can overcome any failure they may have experienced or that they may fear and that it remains their task to spread the gospel too.[6]

Blomberg is basically saying that Mark ended his gospel with fear induced silence in order to encourage Christians to overcome their fears and failures so they can spread the good news. Although not impossible, one wonders why Mark would not in this case emphasize the women's fear *and then their success* over that fear. A more plausible explanation, and one

where the significance of the cause and the magnitude of the effect seem more matched, comes from non-traditional scholarship. They have long pointed out that Mark's ending makes perfect sense if the discovered empty tomb account is a late legend in which the women's fear induced silence "[gave] an answer to the question why the women's story of the empty tomb remained unknown for so long."[7] As Gerd Ludemann says, "other attempts to trace the riddle of the tradition behind Mark 16:1-8 have failed."

Some think that in a patriarchal society, Mark's use of female witnesses counts against the conclusion that the discovered empty tomb tradition is a legend. But the use of women in a legend which is trying to explain why the discovered empty tomb remained unknown for so long actually makes perfect sense. As Earl Doherty says, "Mark is portraying them [the women] exactly as... women were regarded in first-century Palestine.... All they can do is react in fear and terror."[8] Michael Goulder agrees: "You know what women are like. They were so scared that they never passed the message on."[9] Although Mark's tradition does not include how the discovered empty tomb became known if the women did not tell anybody, such means are not usually the focus in a growing legend. It is also easily assumed that the information was leaked out years later from some confidant of the women.

Together, Paul's omission of the discovered empty tomb and the awkward ending to the Gospel of Mark plausibly suggests that the discovered empty tomb tradition is a legend.

The Jewish Charge of a Stolen Body

According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus was buried in a tomb that his followers knew the location of and that the authorities posted guards at (Mt 27:62-66). Then, according to Matthew, the guards passed out from fear when an angel came to open the tomb (Mt 28:1-4). After that (according to Matthew) the guards were paid off by the authorities to keep quiet about the angel and to say instead that Jesus' disciples stole his body while they slept (Mt 28:11-15). Matthew then states that this lie (that Jesus' disciples stole the body while the guards slept) "is still told among the Jews to this day" (Mt 28:15).

This last statement by Matthew strongly suggests that there was an actual charge of a stolen body from some Jews at the time Matthew was writing. Since this charge is from Christianity's opponents, and because this charge presupposes that Jesus' tomb was discovered empty, it is sometimes used as evidence that Jesus' tomb really was discovered empty.

However, since this charge is recorded in a gospel written *after* the Gospel of Mark, this charge could just as easily be the result of apologetics and legendary growth *after* the discovered empty tomb tradition came into circulation. It would have been natural 2000 years ago, just as it would be today, that some people would have accepted the Christian claim of a discovered empty tomb at face value and responded simplistically. The result could have been a sequence of charge/countercharge between unsophisticated Jews and Christians that developed something like this:

- Christian legend arises that Jesus' tomb was found empty.
- Some Jews counter that his followers probably stole the body.
- Christian legend arises that the tomb was guarded.
- Jewish legend arises that the guards probably fell asleep.
- Christian legend arises (reflected in Matthew's gospel) that the guards were paid off by the authorities to *say* they fell asleep when actually they passed out from fear when they saw the precursor to the resurrection, an angel.

The entire sequence could be a series of legends driven by apologetics from both sides over a period of years or decades. That there never were any guards at Jesus' burial spot is supported by three things. First, the gospels of Mark, Luke, and John say nothing about guards at the tomb. Second, Matthew's comment that this "is still told among the Jews to this

day" (Mt 28:15) suggests that the source of the stolen body/sleeping guards charge was not from any official Jewish source or even the guards themselves, but from the general populace. The third thing that supports the conclusion that there never were any guards at Jesus' burial spot is an interesting coincidence in the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew is both the only gospel to post guards at the tomb and the only gospel to have Jesus *publicly* predict his future resurrection (I am excluding the non-canonical Gospel of Peter, which does have a guarded tomb, because we're missing much of that gospel and therefore we do not know if it also has a public prediction of Jesus' future resurrection, although I predict that it will if the rest of that gospel is ever found). In Matthew, Jesus' public prediction of his future resurrection cites Jon 1:17 and goes like this: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth" (Mt 12:40). Later on, when Matthew posts the guards, it is done like this:

> ... the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember *what that impostor said* while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead', and the last deception would be worse than the first." (Mt 27:62-64)

Regarding the connection between the Jon 1:17 announcement and the posting of the guards C.H. Giblin says:

> In [Mt] 27.63, when the Pharisees recall what Jesus said while he was still living, they must be referring principally to what was told them in [Mt] 12.40. For [Mt] 12.40 is the only place where a burial-prediction, able to be construed as a resurrection-prediction was made to them or even stated publicly.[10]

Further cinching the connection that Giblin is referring to, the Gospel of Matthew has Jesus direct his resurrection prediction specifically at the "scribes and Pharisees" (Mt 12:38), the same general authorities who ask Pilate to have the tomb guarded — "the chief priests and the Pharisees"

(Mt 27:62). These things give the impression that Matthew (or the tradition he drew from) has a public announcement about Jesus' future resurrection for the sole purpose of posting guards at the tomb, for in order to have a reason to post guards, one must show that the chief priests and Pharisees knew of this prediction. Adding further to the impression of fabrication or legend, the public prediction of Jesus' future resurrection in Matthew creates a difficulty in the larger Christian storyline — the Jewish authorities understood Jesus' Jon 1:17 resurrection prediction but his own disciples did not, even after Jesus told them in plain language (Mk 9:9-10, 31-32).

According to the highly respected Catholic scholar R.E. Brown: "[Regarding the] existence of a guard... there is neither internal nor external evidence to cause us to affirm historicity."[11] Even evangelical scholar William Craig, after a valiant attempt to defend the guard at the tomb, concludes, "Although there are reasons to doubt the existence of the guard at the tomb, there are also weighty considerations in its favor. It seems best to leave it an open question."[12] But if it is agreed that the guards at the tomb *could* be a fiction, then it is easy to explain the existence of the Jewish charge of a stolen body — it was just a simplistic response by some unsophisticated Jews to the Christian claim of a discovered empty tomb. How more sophisticated Jews might have responded to the Christian claim of a discovered empty tomb will be discussed in the next chapter.

In summary, the Jesus Seminar concludes:

> [The Gospel of] Matthew reflects the view that in some quarters the empty tomb story backfired as an attempt to demonstrate the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. Unbelievers countered the story of the empty tomb with the charge that the body had simply been removed from the tomb by the disciples. Matthew creates a story to counteract that charge and to buttress the account of the empty tomb. The posting of the guard is reported only by Matthew among the canonical gospels.... The Fellows of the Seminar concluded that the original story of the empty tomb was a Markan fiction and that the subsequent fiction of the guards at the tomb and the charge and countercharges were equally fictive.[13]

Conclusion

If the discovered empty tomb tradition is a legend, or even if that is just one plausible way to read the evidence, then a great deal of other questions logically follow that are worth asking in order to see where they lead. The rest of this book will simply step through each of these questions and attempt to show that each has a plausible answer.

Chapter 2

An Obscure Burial

If there never was a discovered empty tomb, how could a belief that Jesus was bodily raised have emerged and survived if his followers could have simply checked the location of Jesus' body and seen that his corpse was still there? There seems to be only one possibility and it has been suggested before — Jesus was removed from the cross and buried in a location unknown to his followers. In this case, his followers would not have been able to check the location of his body to see if his corpse was there or not. But is such a scenario *plausible*?

According to the gospels, Jesus was arrested by the Jewish authorities, given a trial, convicted of blasphemy or some other unidentified infraction, handed over to the Romans who put him on trial again, and then crucified. Although disagreeing that formal trials ever took place or that Jesus was convicted of blasphemy, the arrest by Jewish authorities and the handing over of Jesus to the Romans for crucifixion is also accepted by the Jesus Seminar:

> [We] approved on three different occasions over a ten-year period the statement that Jesus performed some anti-temple act and spoke some word against the temple. More than a hundred scholars participated in these affirmations.... [It is suggested that] Jesus precipitated some kind of temple incident by his aggressive criticism of the commercialization of the temple cult.... [The arresting party] probably consisted of temple police and perhaps those attached to the service of the high priest.... [Those] messengers of the temple bureaucracy would have brought him under arrest to the high priest.... The Fellows were dubious that the ranking priests consulted widely with the elders and scholars and they seriously doubted that the whole Council or Sanhedrin was involved.... [Some] Jewish officials, probably the high priest and his associates, urged Pilate to execute Jesus as a threat to public order. For his part, Pilate needed little

> convincing...it is quite possible that he had issued a standing order for dealing with troublemakers, in which case the "trial" may have been a very brief discussion with the handiest local centurion.[1]

Whether the gospel accounts leading up to Jesus' crucifixion are correct or the Jesus Seminar's version is correct, the handing over of Jesus by the Jewish authorities to the Roman authorities is what is important here.

Such action appears to have been normal procedure for dealing with criminals and troublemakers in first-century Palestine and therefore could plausibly have occurred to Jesus. According to Craig Evans, "The stories in [the Gospel of] Mark and in [the writings of first-century Jewish historian] Josephus reflect standard Roman juridical process, in cases in which indigenous authorities recommend to the Roman authority capital charges."[2] The reference from Josephus that Evans is referring to here involves another man by the name of Jesus being handed over by the Jews to the Romans:

> ... there was one Jesus, the son of Ananus.... [He] came to that feast whereon it is our custom for every one to make tabernacles to God in the temple.... [He] began on a sudden to cry aloud, "A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds, a voice against Jerusalem and the holy house, a voice against the bridegrooms and the brides, and a voice against this whole people!" This was his cry, as he went about by day and by night, in all the lanes of the city. However, certain of the most eminent among the populace had great indignation at this dire cry of his, and took up the man, and gave him a great number of severe stripes; yet did not he either say any thing for himself, or any thing peculiar to those that chastised him, but still went on with the same words which he cried before. Hereupon our rulers, supposing, as the case proved to be, that this was a sort of divine fury in the man, brought him to the Roman procurator, where he was whipped till his bones were laid bare. (War of the Jews 6.5.3)

Out of the thousands of people crucified by the Romans in the decades surrounding Jesus, it is universally accepted that almost all were simply left on the cross to decay, eventually eaten by birds and other wild

animals. This served as a deterrent to others and as a symbol of Roman will, especially during times of rebellion such as those that occurred in 4 B.C.E., 66 C.E., and 70 C.E. But there appears to have been exceptions during peacetime, where crucified bodies were sometimes allowed to be removed from the cross and buried. Many have pointed out the reasons why Jesus' body could plausibly have been removed from the cross for burial.[3] The main reasons are given below.

The following Jewish traditions show that the Jewish authorities would have had a strong *desire* to see Jesus buried:

1] Deut 21:22-23: "If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree [a cross], his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God; you shall not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance." This tradition shows up across a very large body of Jewish literature: Ezek 39:11-16; Josh 8:28-29; 10:25-27; War of the Jews 4.5.2; Antiquities of the Jews 4.8.24; Jn 19:31; GPeter 2:3; 5:1; Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:4-5.

2] Even the wicked, divinely judged, and enemies slain in battle are to be buried (Num 11:33-34; 1 Kgs 11:15; Ezek 39:11-16; Against Apion 2.29; cf. 2.26).

3] Of all of Tobit's virtues, it is his burying the dead that is his greatest (Tobit 1:18-20; 2:3-8; 4:3-4; 6:15; 14:10-13).

4] Burial of a corpse takes precedence over study of the Law, circumcision, or offering the Passover lamb (b. Meg. 3b).

5] A high priest is obligated to bury a neglected corpse if there is no one else to do it (Sipre Num. §26 (on Num 6:6-8)).

6] The importance of care for the dead and their proper burial is well attested in Scripture: Gen 23:4-19; 50:4-14; 50:22-26; Josh 24:32; 1 Sam 31:12-13; 2 Sam 2:4-5; 21:12-14; Num 11:33-34; 1 Kgs 11:15; Ezek 39:11-16.

The following evidence indicates that peacetime Roman administrations sometimes respected local burial sensitivities, and that they may have done so in the case of Jesus:

1] The archaeological discovery of the skeletal remains of a first-century crucifixion victim in a family tomb just outside of Jerusalem (Giv'at ha-Mivtar) indicates that a Roman governor in Jerusalem had at least once released the body of a crucifixion victim for burial. Since it was only by accident that the victim's remains were preserved in such a way as to identify him as a crucifixion victim, it is virtually certain that there were others (there was a knot in the wood of the victim's cross that caused one of the nails to bend 180 degrees back on itself and become unremovable; the nail and the piece of wood were buried with the victim with the nail still imbedded in the skeletal remains).

2] Philo writes in the early first century that on the eve of Roman holidays in Egypt, crucified bodies were sometimes taken down and given to their families (Flaccum 10.83-84).

3] Cicero mentions in 70 B.C.E. a governor in Sicily who released bodies to family members in return for a fee (Verrem 2.5.45).

4] The Digest of Justinian (48.24) has Augustus in the early first century giving crucified bodies back to their families and Paulus in the third century saying that crucified bodies should be given to any who seek their burial.

5] On the eve of Passover, a holiday that celebrates Israel's liberation from foreign domination, Pilate may not have wanted to risk provoking the Jewish population and so may have allowed Jesus to be buried.

6] The assertion in the Gospel of Mark that Pilate "used to release for them one prisoner for whom they asked" (Mark 15:6) suggests that during the first century C.E. one could plausibly tell stories of Roman judicial clemency, especially around religious holidays.

7] That five gospels (including the non-canonical Gospel of Peter), Paul's epistles (Rom 6:4-6), and the earliest creed (1 Cor 15:4), texts and traditions designed to sustain belief in the first century, could tell of a crucifixion victim being buried, and that these texts proved successful in sustaining that belief, shows that the removal of a crucifixion victim from the cross during a major Jewish festival was considered at that time a plausible event.

If the Roman authorities allowed Jesus to be removed from the cross, it seems almost certain that they would have handed the body back to the Jewish authorities. This is supported by the fact that in every point of evidence above where the Romans sometimes allowed crucifixion victims to be removed from the cross, they gave the body back to the family, a process which presumably would have gone through the Jewish authorities. The question then arises, what would the Jewish authorities have done with Jesus' body once they had it, and what would Jesus' family, friends, and followers have done? To answer that, we have to look at how first-century Jews buried their poor and the difference between an honorable and a dishonorable Jewish burial.

First-Century Jewish Burial of the Poor

It is widely acknowledged amongst archaeologists and biblical scholars that first-century Jews who were poor were not normally buried in rock-hewn tombs. Instead, they were buried in the ground:

> The eight hundred tombs thus far discovered in the vicinity of Jerusalem do not reflect the totality of the burials. Kloner estimates at 50 the highest average number of burials in a single tomb. The corresponding number of deaths in Jerusalem from the third century B.C.E to the first century C.E. (period of the finds) would then be only 40,000. Kloner's estimate of the number of deaths is about 750,000 for this period; such a figure would mean that, at best, only about 5 percent of the tombs have been found. Presumably these tombs belonged to the middle and upper classes, with *the rest of the population buried in simple shallow pits that have long since disappeared*.[4]

> Because of the expense associated with hewing a burial cave out of bedrock...only upper class and upper-middle class Jerusalemites could afford rock-hewn tombs. The poorer members of Jerusalem's population apparently disposed of their dead in a manner that has left few traces in the archaeological record, for example in simple individual trench graves dug into the ground....The majority of victims crucified by the Romans belonged to the lower classes — precisely those who could not afford rock-hewn tombs.... Because trench graves are poor in finds and are much less conspicuous and more susceptible to destruction than rock-hewn tombs, relatively few examples are recorded.... Jesus' family did not own a rock-hewn tomb.[5]

> In Jeremiah 26:23 King Jehoiakim is said to have slain the prophet Uriah "and cast his dead body into the burial place of the common people". That these "graves" designate a communal burial ground is suggested not only by the language of throwing or casting of the corpse, but also by 2 Kings 23:6, for Josiah is there said to have taken the ashes of the Asherah he had burned and "threw its dust on the graves of the common people", a description which does not pass well with tombs [see too Jer 31:40]. It may well have been the case that these burial plots were reserved for persons too poor to afford a tomb for burial. Similarly, in Matthew 27:7 the high priests are said to have taken Judas' blood money and "bought the Potter's Field as a burial place for strangers". Tombs are not located in a field, and foreigners who die far from home will not have tombs in Jerusalem awaiting use.[6]

Some think poor criminals were the exception, that they received a rock-hewn tomb burial in a specially designated criminal's graveyard. This conclusion is based on a passage from the Mishnah which says:

> They did not bury the condemned in the burial grounds of his ancestors, but there were two graveyards made ready for the use of the court, one for those who were beheaded or strangled, and one for those who were stoned or burned. When the flesh [of the criminal]

> had wasted away they gathered together the bones and buried them in their own place [the family burial place]. (Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:5-6)

The reference in this passage to gathering the bones and burying them with the family, called "secondary burial" and usually occurring about a year after "primary" (or initial) burial, strongly suggests that rock-hewn tombs were used for criminals so that their bones could be easily collected at a later date for burial with the family.

However, going against this conclusion in the case of poor criminals is that virtually all archaeological discoveries of Jewish ground burials (those of poor people) have only *individuals* in them. As archaeologist Boaz Zissu says, "In most cases, the Beit Safafa graves [2 miles southwest of Jerusalem] contained only one body each."[7] Zissu goes on to say that none of the tombs had more than two bodies. Hershel Shanks finds the same thing at Qazone (43 miles southeast of Jerusalem) and Qumran (14 miles east of Jerusalem): "...each grave [at Qazone] contained a single body, as did almost all the excavated tombs at Qumran."[8] Shanks also goes on to say that no grave ever contained more than two bodies. Similar graves of individuals have been found at Ein el-Ghuweir (16 miles southeast of Jerusalem).[9] These finds suggest that poor people did not have a place where they consolidated the bones of family and therefore did not practice the secondary burial suggested in the Mishnah passage above.

If poor people did not practice secondary burial, then the Mishnah passage above, with its implied rock-hewn tomb, most likely applied only to criminals wealthy enough to expect secondary burial in a family tomb or, for those only moderately wealthy, an ossuary. This would leave the poorest criminals to be buried in the ground, and only once. This conclusion is consistent with the archaeological evidence; as Jodi Magness says:

> There is no evidence that the Sanhedrin or the Roman authorities paid for and maintained rock-hewn tombs for executed criminals from impoverished families. Instead, these unfortunates would have been buried in individual trench graves or pits.[10]

A final thing to look at regarding first-century Jewish burial of the poor is how their graves were marked. According to Jodi Magness:

> After the trench was filled in, a rough headstone was often erected at one end. [Today,] the headstones are uninscribed, although some may once have had painted decorations or inscriptions that have not survived.[11]

In contrast to what Magness found, Boaz Zissu found at the Qumran tombs mentioned earlier fewer graves marked by headstones and more marked with just a pile of loose rocks: “each... is marked by a cairn or, less often, a large standing stone.”[12] According to Jon Davies, some graves may not have been marked even by a cairn, but only the mark described in the Mishnah to give warning of uncleanness: “whiting [chalk] mingled with water and poured over the grave.”[13]

All of the above suggests that Jesus, whether buried in the criminal’s graveyard or not, would have under normal circumstances been buried in the ground. If there were no family or friends present at the burial, and especially if Jesus was buried dishonorably, both of which will be suggested next, it is plausible that those who buried Jesus did not make any special effort to gather a headstone and inscribe Jesus’ name on it, but simply marked the grave with whiting to show uncleanness or with a pile of loose rocks to show that someone was buried there.

Dishonorable Versus Honorable Burial

Regardless of whether the charge brought against Jesus was legitimate or not, if Jewish officials urged Pilate to execute him, it seems likely that they would have followed through and treated him as a criminal in his burial too. This would have resulted in a dishonorable burial.

Virtually all scholars agree that rites of mourning were not allowed at a dishonorable burial. In the Old Testament it is said of a criminal’s burial, “They shall not lament for him...” (Jer 22:18). A continuation of the earlier Mishnah passage suggests that no mourning was allowed for those criminals who received a secondary burial, which would imply the same restriction existed at their primary burial:

> The kinsmen came and greeted the judges and the witnesses as if to say, “We have nothing against you in our hearts, for you have judged

> the judgment of truth." And they used to *not make open lamentation*, but they went mourning, for mourning has its place in the heart. (Mishnah Sanhedrin 6:6, emphasis added)

The Talmud also restricts mourning: "For those executed by the court, no rites whatsoever should be observed..." (Semahot 2:6). Although the Jewish court did not themselves execute Jesus, they nevertheless handed over Jesus to the Romans with the intent that he be crucified and so this passage would seem to apply.

The texture of a dishonorable burial is further filled out by the Jewish historian Josephus, who suggests that few would attend: "He that blasphemeth God, let him be stoned; and let him hang upon a tree all that day, and then let him be buried in an ignominious and *obscure* manner" (Antiquities of the Jews 4.8.6, emphasis added). Although Jesus may not have been charged with blasphemy as the gospels claim, Jospehus' remarks nevertheless reflect the obscure nature of a criminal's burial in general. Josephus also makes reference to a "night" burial which may be just another way of referring to an obscure burial. For those dishonorable to their parents Josephus says, "... and there let him be stoned; and when he has continued there for one whole day, that all the people may see him, let him be buried *in the night*" (Antiquities of the Jews 4.8.24, emphasis added). Referring to a thief Josephus says, "... he was immediately put to death; and attained no more than to be buried *in the night* in a disgraceful manner, and such as was suitable to a condemned malefactor" (Antiquities of the Jews 5.1.14, emphasis added).

It is unclear if a dishonorable burial entailed the banning of all attendance or only the attendance of those who might mourn. However, even if the latter, it is unlikely that any of Jesus' followers who thought they could keep from mourning would have attended Jesus' burial. Without a family burial place to later move the bones to, and with his burial spot in Jerusalem far from where most of his followers lived in Galilee, knowing the exact spot where Jesus was buried would not have been important. More significantly, and because Jesus at the moment must have looked like a failure, those who were associated with him may all have stayed back to avoid public humiliation. There would also have been an incentive for Jesus' followers to avoid his burial due to fear of being identified by Roman or Jewish authorities who could make reprisals

against them or use them to get to other followers of Jesus whom the authorities might still have seen as potential troublemakers. Such behavior by the authorities is noted by first-century historian Tacitus. He noted that as people lingered around the corpses of those executed by the Romans in 32 C.E. (within a year or two of Jesus' crucifixion), "Spies were set round them, who noted the sorrow of each mourner..." (Annals 6.19). In conclusion, if Jesus was buried dishonorably, it is doubtful that any of his family, friends, or followers would have attended the burial.

But what if Jesus was for some reason buried honorably? It turns out that nothing substantial changes, for in this case mourners still would not have been allowed to attend the burial. This conclusion is based on a Mishnah passage which reads, "A mourner must not observe mourning on festivals, for it is written: 'And thou shalt rejoice on thy feast' [Deut 16:14]" (Moed Katan 3:7-9). As William Craig says about this passage:

> According to the Mishnah, lamentation for the deceased is actually *forbidden* during a Jewish feast to all but the next of kin (Moed Katan 3.7-9).... Executed by crucifixion during the juxtaposed feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread, he [Jesus] could not be publicly lamented by his followers.[14] [Note: This Jewish restriction on mourning would apply even if the Passover Seder was on the night *after* Jesus' crucifixion (as is suggested in Jn 18:28; 19:14; and GPeter 2:5). In this case the afternoon of Jesus' death would still be a festival, in this case Passover instead of the Festival of Unleavened Bread.]

Although the context of the above passage allows mourning by next of kin, even the gospels do not place a next of kin at Jesus' burial. Regarding the woman named Mary (with different sons referred to) in the gospel burial accounts — "Mary the mother of Joses" (Mk 15:47), "Mary the mother of James" (Lk 24:10), and "the other Mary" (Mt 27:61) — R.E. Brown says:

> The possibility that this Mary is the same person known to John as Mary of Clopas [Jn 19:25] is good....In John alone the mother of Jesus is at Golgotha [observing Jesus' crucifixion]; but she and the disciple whom Jesus loved seem to depart before Jesus' death (19:27), and they are absent from the burial account.[15]

In conclusion, whether Jesus was buried honorably or dishonorably, mourning would have been prohibited. In this case, attendance at the burial, if not altogether banned, would have been restricted to those who could keep from mourning. However, it is likely that those followers of Jesus who thought they could keep from mourning stayed away from the burial to avoid public humiliation and out of fear of reprisal or monitoring by Roman or Jewish authorities. In this case, none of Jesus' followers would have been present at Jesus' burial and so none would have known where he was buried.

It is worth noting that Jesus' burial location would still have been unknown to his followers even if he was buried in a rock-hewn tomb in the criminal's graveyard instead of in the ground. However, not only does the evidence suggest a ground burial more likely, but, counterintuitively, a ground burial actually makes better sense of the way in which a rock-hewn tomb burial legend came about in the first gospel, the Gospel of Mark.

The Rock-Hewn Tomb Burial Legend in the Gospel of Mark

The gospels say that Jesus was buried in a rock-hewn tomb and that his followers knew the location. But the above analysis suggests that the most likely outcome for a person in Jesus' situation was an obscure ground burial. If an obscure ground burial occurred, it is worth asking why the burial accounts emerged as they did in the gospels (those who consider such a question a moot point because legends often go in all kinds of unexplainable directions can skip this whole section; restart at the section at the end of this chapter entitled "A Few Other Considerations Related to Jesus' Burial").

There have been a variety of attempts to explain the intentions behind the gospel burial accounts. One is from Byron McCane who argues that Jesus was in reality buried dishonorably in a criminal's rock-hewn tomb, that Mark more or less accurately records this, and the desire to lessen the shame of such a burial provides the best framework to understand the legendary progression in the later gospels, most notably Jesus' honorable burial in the rock-hewn tomb of a follower (Mt 27:57-60; Jn 19:38-40). While persuasive, McCane's theory goes against the more likely

possibility that poor criminals were buried in the ground, not rock-hewn tombs. Additionally, as William Craig points out:

> ... early Christian theology would have faced no more serious difficulty by Jesus' dishonorable burial than by his dishonorable death. For his burial in shame could have been nicely interpreted as the fulfillment of the prophetic word in Isaiah 53:9: "His grave was assigned to be with wicked men." Strong theological impetus is thus lacking for the distorting influences postulated by McCane.[16]

It is suggested here that a ground burial actually provides a better framework for understanding the intent behind the gospel burial legends. Mark's burial account is of paramount interest because that is the earliest burial account that we have. As Raymond Brown, again, a highly respected Catholic scholar says:

> True, we have in the Matthean and Lucan accounts of the burial an early interpretation of Mark; but... there is a very high possibility that these two evangelists have changed and developed the Marcan outlook. Consequently, I shall not use Matthew and Luke as a primary guide to Mark's intention.[17]

Because of the primacy of the Gospel of Mark, Mark's burial account will be looked at in detail below. It is worth noting that the historicity of Joseph of Arimathea does not matter for this analysis. Even if he was a member of the Sanhedrin and buried Jesus, the use of his name in burial legends years later that relate allegiances and actions that he never had or did would not be surprising if he was by that time dead or not in the locale where the story was growing.

The following is the entire burial account, including the lead into it, from chapter 15 in the Gospel of Mark:

> Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. [38]And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. [39]Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" [40]There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary

> Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. [41]These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem. [42]When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, [43]Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. [44]Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. [45]When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. [46]Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. [47]Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid. (Mk 15:37-47)

The intentions behind Mark's burial account that will be suggested below operate under the assumption that the *primary* goal of Mark's burial account is to explain how Jesus followers were able to see *where* he was buried, for one must know where a body is buried in order to later discover that burial location empty.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is a convicted criminal in the eyes of the Jewish authorities (even though a false conviction of blasphemy, Mk 14:55-64; 15:9-10). If behind Mark's burial account lies the common knowledge by the author and the audience that Jesus would normally under the circumstances have been buried in the ground with none of his followers present (for the reasons outlined previously), then a certain logic becomes apparent that explains why the women were able to see *where* Jesus was buried. But before focusing on that aspect of Mark's burial account that explains why Jesus' followers were able to see where he was buried, every other detail of Mark's burial account needs to be meticulously addressed in order to solidify the rest of the picture because that picture often shifts around as people try to reconcile Mark's burial account with the burial accounts in the later gospels. As I go through each of these details, I rely heavily on the highly esteemed opinion of Catholic scholar Raymond Brown.

Before his burial account, Mark twice makes it clear that "the whole council" was complicit in the death of Jesus (Mk 14:55; 15:1). He then refers to Joseph in his burial account as "a respected member of the council" (Mk 15:43). Regarding this characterization of Joseph in light of the fact that the whole council was complicit in the death of Jesus, William Lyons says:

> ... the use of βουλευτής ["member of the council" (Mk 15:43)] here clearly serves to indicate to the readers that Joseph was one of those responsible for his death....Being esteemed as a member of the council responsible for the death of Jesus is unlikely to suggest to Mark's readers that they should themselves respect Joseph. In this context it [the word "respected"] is more probably intended to explain Pilate's decision to grant Joseph's request [for Jesus' body].[18]

Lyons' conclusion is consistent with the "boldness" it took for Joseph to ask Pilate for Jesus' body (Mk 15:43), this qualifier suggesting that Pilate did not always grant or appreciate such requests. R.E. Brown agrees with Lyons: "Mark wanted his readers to know that Joseph was a distinguished member of the Sanhedrin.... [There] is nothing in Mark's first item of information about Joseph to make readers think of him as a follower or supporter of Jesus."[19]

Regarding Mark's characterization of Joseph as someone "who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God" (Mk 15:43), Donald Senior concludes:

> This suggests that he [Joseph] was not yet a disciple, but is someone open and responsive to the message Jesus proclaimed (cf. Mk 1:14-15). In similar language Jesus had blessed the Scribe who instinctively understood and accepted Jesus' teaching on the primacy of the love command [Mk 12:28-34].... In both instances, a person from the ranks of those who seem to be Jesus' unyielding foes — the scribes and the council — is stirred by Jesus and in so doing moves closer to the Kingdom they seek.[20]

R. E. Brown agrees:

> If Mark had wished to describe the burial of Jesus by a disciple, that could easily have been made unambiguous, as in the instance of the burial of John's body by "his disciples" (Mk 6:29).... [Mark's Joseph] might be described as a pious Jew who awaited the kingdom of God in the sense that he sought only to obey the commandments, much as the scribe of Mk 12:28.... "A respected council member who was also himself awaiting the kingdom of God" meant that Joseph was a religiously pious Sanhedrist who, despite the condemnation of Jesus by the Sanhedrin, felt an obligation under the Law to bury this crucified criminal before sunset... the inability of Jews to carry a corpse on the Sabbath [being] a practice surely forbidden in NT times (cf. John 5:10) and specifically [forbidden] in *m. Sabb*. 10:5 [the Jews counted days from sunset to sunset, so the Sabbath began at sunset on Friday].[21]

Regarding Joseph's request for only Jesus' body, Mark's account may intend that the other two crucifixion victims are not yet dead since sometimes it took more than a day for crucifixion victims to die. Supporting this conclusion is Pilate's response to Joseph's request for Jesus' body: "[Pilate] wondered if he were already dead" (Mk 15:44). Only after summoning the centurion and confirming Jesus' death did Pilate grant the body to Joseph. R.E. Brown suggests another possibility that explains why Joseph requested only Jesus' body in Mark's burial account: "We have to assume that the story in the Synoptics has been narrowed down in its focus to Jesus, ignoring the two others who were no longer theologically or dramatically important."[22]

Regarding Mark's "linen cloth" used to wrap Jesus' body (Mk 15:46), R.E. Brown notes:

> It is not justified to claim that *sindōn* ["linen cloth"] was of such quality that readers would have to recognize the burial as honorable. *Byssos* is the really fine linen. To specify that the *sindōn* he took over from Mark would befit a burial rendered to Jesus by a disciple, Matthew (27:59) adds "clean white" (*katharos*). The argument of Shea that if Joseph were not a disciple of Jesus and were just burying a criminal, he would have wrapped the body in ragged, torn, dirty winding sheets makes little sense.... This is a hasty, impromptu

> gesture by Joseph. Are we to suppose that he would go home (to Arimathea?) or go into the city to friend's homes asking them for some dirty cloths? Rather he went and purchased what was readily available, and stores certainly did not sell torn cloths for interring criminals.... Some have puzzled whether Joseph had sufficient time to go and buy such a cloth.... [However, one could] take the verbs that describe his action causatively: "having had a linen cloth bought" – a cooperation that would have sped up the process. Similarly, although Mark seems to have Joseph himself "take down" Jesus, Joseph would have had him taken down by others. Sometimes confirmation for this is found in the words spoken at the empty tomb in Mark 16:6: "See the place where *they* placed him."[23]

Mark describes the tomb as having a "very large" stone (Mk 16:4) to block the entrance, and the women visiting the tomb ask, "Who will *roll* away the stone for us?" (Mk 16:3). With the help of the later gospels, most notably Matthew's burial in a "rich man's" tomb (Mt 27:57), many have concluded that Mark has in sight a *disc-shaped* stone for the tomb's entrance and therefore a very extravagant tomb. However, it is more likely that a square/rectangular stone is intended not only in Mark, but Matthew as well. Archaeologist Amos Kloner explains:

> More than 98 percent of the Jewish tombs from this period, called the Second Temple period (c. first century B.C.E. to 70 C.E.), were closed with square blocking stones...only four are known to have used round (disk shaped) blocking stones... [and] they occur only in the more elaborate cave tombs, which had at least two rooms or, as in one case, a spacious hall.... Matthew, Mark and Luke all describe the stone being "rolled" (in John it is "taken away") [see Mt 27:60; 28:2; Mk 15:46; 16:3-4; Lk 24:2; Jn 20:1], and thus it is only natural to assume that the stone was round. But we must remember that "rolled" is a translation of the Greek word *kulio*, which can also mean "dislodge," "move back" or simply "move". This ambiguity in the text, combined with the archaeological evidence, leads me to agree with the scholar Gustave Dalman, who, as early as 1935, suggested that Matthew 27 does not refer to a round blocking stone.... In Matthew 28 an angel sits on the stone after "rolling" it back [Mt 28:2]. If the stone had

> been rolled back between two walls, as was the case with Second Temple period round stones, it would have been impossible to sit on it [the top of the disk would normally be enclosed within two walls]. Indeed, it would be difficult to sit on the edge of a disk-shaped stone even if it had been pulled back from the tomb entrance. A square blocking stone would make a much better perch. Of course, with angels anything can happen, but it seems likely that the human author of the Gospel would have described the angel sitting on a square stone.... Most likely Jesus' tomb [that is being described in the gospels] was a standard small burial room, with a standing pit and burial benches along three sides...[24]

R.E. Brown agrees:

> Apparently Matthew 28:2 supposes a boulder, since the angel who rolls away the stone sits on it — a wheel-shaped stone would most likely have been rolled back into a rock recess or flat along the outside of the tomb and thus not available for sitting.... The reason for mentioning the size of the stone [Mk 16:4] is to increase the miraculous element in the stone's being rolled back when the women visit the tomb on Sunday.[25]

A final detail to address in Mark's burial account is that it may intend the women closed the distance between them and the burial enough to see inside the tomb: "[they] saw *where* the body was laid" (Mk 15:47). However, this verse may instead intend that the women only saw *which tomb* Jesus was laid in, never moving from the spot in the "distance" (Mk 15:40) that they watched the crucifixion from. It is noteworthy that Mark never narrates the women moving from this spot in the distance. Either possibility is compatible with the later statement by the angel: "look, there is the *place* they laid him" (Mk 16:6) — the angel may be pointing out the bench/niche that the women saw Jesus laid on, or the angel may be pointing out the bench/niche that *he* knew Jesus was laid on. Whichever Mark intends, either is compatible with the analysis here.

So in summary up to this point, we have in Mark's gospel a Joseph who is a pious Sanhedrist who only desires to carry out the Jewish law and bury this crucified criminal before sunset. With this established, we can

now look at that aspect of Mark's burial account that answers what I am proposing here was the most important thing that his burial account needed to convey — how it was that Jesus' followers knew *where* Jesus was buried.

Richard Carrier points out the urgency of sundown in Mark's burial account:

> ... before even asking for the body, "evening had already come" (Mark 15:42).... Since Mark specifically says it was still the day *before* the Sabbath, the word for "evening" (*opsia*, "late" sc. "hour") must refer to the hour or minutes just before sunset.... and there was yet further delay awaiting the centurion to confirm the death of Jesus (Mark 15:44), and then all the walking involved (both to and from Pilate, then from the cross to the grave).... [The] phrases used for the time of burial imply that the sun was virtually in the process of going down once Joseph arrived and had the permission to get the body.... Likewise, we are told that the women assumed the burial was not completed (they went to complete the anointing on Sunday [Mk 16:1-2]), so we even have some positive evidence that there wasn't enough time [to complete all the desired burial actions].[26]

R.E. Brown agrees: "Mark describes the sparsest type of burial, marked by haste and lacking in amenities."[27]

If behind Mark's burial account lies the common expectation that Jesus would normally under the circumstances have been buried in the ground with none of his followers present, Mark's burial account appears to be conveying the idea that Jesus' followers were able to see where Jesus was buried because the trip to the criminal's graveyard, or wherever Jesus would have been buried obscurely in the ground (perhaps the Kidron or Hinnom valley), was cut short by sunset, causing Joseph to put Jesus temporarily in an available rock-hewn tomb very close to or at the site of the crucifixion. In other words, Mark's rushed burial into the closest available rock-hewn tomb conveys to a first-century audience why the women were able to see *where* Jesus was buried, knowing where Jesus was buried being a necessary condition for what follows — the discovery of that burial location empty. This is in my opinion a better explanation of Mark's burial account than Byron McCane's hypothesis that Mark was

describing the dishonorable burial of Jesus in a criminal's rock-hewn tomb. Under McCane's hypothesis (and assuming the criminal's graveyard was out of eyesight from the crucifixion spectator area), Mark's burial account leaves unexplained *why* the women were able to see what should have been an obscure burial. Archeologist Amos Kloner agrees that a temporary burial is intended in Mark's gospel:

> Jesus' burial took place on the eve of the Sabbath. His would have been a hurried funeral, in observance of the Jewish law that forbade leaving the corpse unburied overnight.... The body was simply and hastily covered with a shroud and placed on a burial bench in a small burial cave.... I would go one step further and suggest that Jesus' tomb was what the sages refer to as a "borrowed or temporary tomb." During the Second Temple period and later, Jews often practiced temporary burial. This is reflected, for example, in two quotations from rabbinic sources involving burial customs and mourning:
>
> Whoever finds a corpse in a tomb should not move it from its place, unless he knows that this is a *temporary* grave. (Semahot 13:5, emphasis added)
>
> Rabbi Simeon ben Eleazar says: "Rabban Gamaliel had a *temporary* tomb in Yabneh into which they bring the corpse and lock the door upon it..." (Semahot 10:8, emphasis added)
>
> [See too Talmud Baba Bathra 102b: "People do not plant [vines] with the object of pulling them out, [but a burial] may sometimes take place at twilight and it is put down *temporarily*."][28]

It is worth asking, if Mark intends a temporary burial, when in such a situation would Joseph most likely return to the tomb to rebury Jesus where he was supposed to be buried in the ground? The most obvious answer might seem to be as soon as the Sabbath ended at sunset on Saturday. However, if a Saturday night return by Joseph was a likely option, it seems Mark's audience would have naturally concluded from Mark's gospel that the women found an empty tomb on Sunday morning simply because Joseph had moved the body the previous night, in which case Mark's discovered empty tomb account would have failed as an

argument for Jesus' resurrection. That Mark's gospel did not fail as an argument for Jesus' resurrection suggests that there was something about Jewish burial practices or some practical matter that made a Saturday night return by Joseph unlikely. Perhaps the fact that it was dark when the Sabbath ended was reason enough to wait until Sunday morning for such a mundane transfer of a corpse (as opposed to the intentional night burials mentioned earlier by Josephus to inflict dishonor on the buried person). Further suggesting a Saturday night return to the tomb unlikely is that in Mark's account the women do not return to the tomb on Saturday night even though they buy spices that night for anointing Jesus' body (Mk 16:1). If behind Mark's burial account was the knowledge that it was unlikely anyone would have returned to the tomb before Sunday morning, Mark further reveals his intent to convey a temporary burial by eliminating the possibility that the women missed a first light Sunday morning transfer of Jesus' body. He does this by placing the women at the tomb just as the sun was rising: "they came unto the sepulchre *at the rising of the sun*" (Mk 16:2 KJV, Young, Webster, and NLT translation).

In conclusion, it makes sense that a hurried rock-hewn tomb burial legend would emerge out of an obscure ground burial in order to explain how some of Jesus' followers were able to see where he was buried, seeing where Jesus was buried being a necessary part of the discovered empty burial location legend. It also makes sense that all burial accounts after Mark's would continue to have Jesus buried in a rock-hewn tomb not only because that was the tradition passed down to them, but because the much more important tradition — the discovered empty tomb tradition — was by then based on a rock-hewn tomb.

A Few Other Considerations Related to Jesus' Burial

If Jesus received an obscure ground burial, why is there no attestation of this in all of the Jewish and Christian literature? This is a good question, but in fact it is entirely expected that the real details of Jesus' burial do not show up in either literary record. Before the Christian claim of a discovered empty tomb showed up a decade or more after Jesus' death, the details of Jesus' burial would have been unimportant and not part of any historical core that anyone could expect to be preserved in either the Jewish or Christian literature. Even in the earliest Christian

literature, all we find is that Jesus was "buried" (1 Cor 15:4; Rom 6:4). When Christians finally claimed a discovered empty tomb, with its associated rock-hewn tomb burial, sophisticated Jews most likely ignored the claim, for unless one has specific evidence, how is one supposed to argue that an exception to the normal burial process for a person buried over a decade earlier did *not* take place? Even if some Jews responded that Jesus should have been or was buried obscurely in the ground, it would not be surprising if this charge was not preserved in the Jewish literature given how little the Jews wrote about Jesus. In a similar manner, the Jewish charge of a stolen body does not show up in the Jewish literature even though we know it existed because it appears in the Christian literature (as discussed in Chapter One). Furthermore, the only reason the Christians recorded the Jewish charge of a stolen body was because they had an apologetic response to it (the tomb was guarded). In contrast, there would be no reason for Christians to record the Jewish charge of an obscure burial. They had already answered it as best they could in the gospel burial accounts themselves.

Nevertheless, there may actually be one literary attestation of Jesus being buried in obscurity in the ground. In the non-canonical Secret Gospel of James, written around 100-150 C.E., there is a scene where Jesus appears to his disciples after his death and says:

> You have not yet been mistreated and have not yet been accused unjustly, nor have you yet been shut up in prison, nor have you yet been condemned lawlessly, nor have you yet been crucified without reason, nor have you yet been buried *in the sand*, as was I myself. [Some translations use the word "shamefully" instead of "in the sand", but according to Peter Kirby the latter is the correct literal translation.[29]]

If this passage is referring to a ground burial, it is significant because it is unlikely that a rock-hewn tomb burial would be legendized into a ground burial. More likely the legend would develop in the opposite direction. Therefore, this piece of literature may preserve an accurate memory of Jesus' burial.

Another question that often pops up in discussions about Jesus' burial is why didn't the Jewish authorities simply exhume Jesus' body from the

ground and parade it around to debunk the belief that Jesus was raised? This assumes the Jewish authorities paid any serious attention to the earliest Christians, which they probably did not. But even if they did, Gerald Bostock points out why such action would have been counterproductive:

> [The] production of the body would have involved the priestly party in taking seriously the resurrection claims of the disciples, and with it the admission that they might have crucified God's Messiah.... [It would also make them guilty of the] heinous offense of despoiling a grave.... What is more there was no reason at all for them to produce the body until the time of Pentecost, when the disciples made the first public statement about the resurrection. By then, however, seven weeks had passed, and at that stage the corpse would not have been easily demonstrated to be the body of Jesus. The time-lag would have made the production of the body a futile exercise, even if its production could have proved anything of significance.[30] [Note: As will be shown in Chapter Five, most corpses in the Palestinian climate started to become unrecognizable after only three days.]

A final consideration related to Jesus' burial involves tomb veneration. That Jesus' burial location was unknown to his followers is consistent with the absence of evidence that Jesus' burial location was ever venerated in the first decades after his death. The absolute earliest evidence of people venerating a tomb associated with Jesus is 135 C.E., and most think not until the fourth century. Both are well after the discovered empty tomb tradition came into circulation and therefore it would not be surprising if some tomb was by that time thought to be the one Jesus had been in even if the real site of burial was never known. I do not understand how some use the absence of early tomb veneration as evidence that Jesus' tomb was actually found empty, the logic being that because it was found empty, the earliest Christians did not care to venerate it. Even if Jesus' tomb was found empty, no one could have stopped early Christians from flocking to visit and venerate the site where the miracle of Jesus' resurrection took place, just as thousands of Christians today flock to the two competing sites for Jesus' burial in Jerusalem. As Peter Carnley says, "The pious interest in the alleged site of the Holy Sepulchre in our own day seems to

render such an argument [that lack of tomb veneration points to a discovered empty tomb] completely impotent."[31]

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is plausible that Jesus was buried in the ground in a location unknown to his followers and that the gospel burial accounts are legends. In this case, the only thing historical on this topic that is preserved in the literary record is that Jesus was buried, and that is exactly how it appears in the earliest literary evidence: "he was buried" (1 Cor 15:4).

Chapter 3

The Belief That Jesus Died for Our Sins and Was Raised

1 Cor 15:3-4: "... Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and... he was raised... in accordance with the scriptures..."

If there never was a discovered empty tomb, and if Jesus was buried in a location unknown to his followers, what could have caused the nearly instantaneous rise of the radical beliefs that Jesus died for our sins and was raised? Some have proposed that post-mortem hallucinations of Jesus kick-started these beliefs. However, this seems implausible to me primarily for a reason that others have found it implausible:

> Precisely because such encounters [visions of recently dead people] were reasonably well known, they *could not possibly*, by themselves, have given rise to the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead.... [Jesus' followers] said what nobody had ever said about such a dead person before, that they had been *raised from* the dead.[1]

The only explanation that seems to make good sense of the nearly instantaneous rise of such radical beliefs is the just as radical human phenomenon of cognitive dissonance reduction.

What is Cognitive Dissonance Reduction?

Most non-traditional scholars doubt that Jesus ever claimed he was the messiah. However, Jesus obviously made a big impression on some people. Because of this, it is plausible that some thought or hoped he was the messiah, perhaps a sentiment like that expressed in the Gospel of Luke: "...we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:21).

How might people like this, Jesus' most ardent followers who thought or hoped he might be the messiah, react to the harsh reality of his death? For most people most of the time, the reaction in such a situation is the depressing realization that expectations were wrong. But sometimes people do not follow that route. We human beings have a tendency, when we deeply believe or want to believe in something, to look for and arrive at conclusions that confirm what we already believe or want to believe. This sometimes leads to extraordinary displays of rationalization when strongly held beliefs are inescapably disconfirmed by reality. The internal tension due to a disconfirming event is called "cognitive dissonance" by psychologists, and the release of this tension due to rationalization (or any other action) is called "cognitive dissonance reduction".

The only significant critique of this theory I have seen is one made in 2003 by traditional scholar N.T. Wright.[2] The controversy surrounding this theory can be seen in Wright's strong disagreement with it and the response of a non-traditional scholar to Wright's critique. According to Wright, "The flaws in this argument [that cognitive dissonance caused early Christian belief] are so enormous that it is puzzling to find serious scholars still referring to it in deferential terms."[3] Non-traditional scholar Robert M. Price responds to Wright's critique:

> ...there are many viable explanations [for the rise of the belief that Jesus resurrected], not least Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance reduction, whereby more than one disappointed sect has turned defeat into zeal by means of face-saving denial. Wright *suicidally* mentions this theory, only to dismiss it... with no serious attempt at refutation [emphasis added].[4]

I agree with Price. Wright does not adequately rebut this idea. Below is an explanation of this theory which at the same time addresses all of Wright's objections for anyone who might read his critique.

The study of cognitive dissonance was pioneered in the 1950's by the late social psychologist Dr. Leon Festinger. After his death in 1989, Festinger's peers put together a collection of his best works, including his study of cognitive dissonance, and referred to him as, "the dominant figure in social psychology since Kurt Lewin" and "a towering figure in contemporary social science and one of the foremost adventurers of the

mind."[5] A decade later, the American Psychological Association's Scientific Conference Program dedicated one of its volumes to Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance where it is said, "Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance has been one of the most influential theories in social psychology."[6]

Although the 1999 Scientific Conference Program report fans out into a diverse array of study related to cognitive dissonance, included in it is one of Festinger's initial experiments from the 1950's.[7] In this experiment, Festinger infiltrated a small cult group and observed firsthand their behavior when their religious beliefs were disconfirmed by the harsh reality of events. This experiment is fully documented in Festinger's original 1956 book *When Prophecy Fails*.[8] This experiment will be summarized below and it serves as both an initial explanation and the first of three examples of the extraordinary effects of cognitive dissonance. It is important to point out that the actual beliefs of the cult group below, which are quite bizarre and no doubt related to the UFO craze of the time, are not being compared to Christianity in any way. The only thing that is being illustrated below is that people can sometimes come up with ingenious and complex explanations in order to make sense of a disconnect between deeply held beliefs and the harsh reality of events. It is this concept that will be later applied to the formation of the early Christian beliefs that Jesus "died for our sins" and was "raised".

The cult group consisted of 11 hardcore members and numerous transitory participants. It was led by a woman who believed she was receiving mental messages from spacemen on another planet. The cult received a message in August 1954 that great cataclysm would ensue around the world on December 21st of the same year. The cult publicly declared this belief and attracted much media and public attention. Additional messages from the spacemen led the cult to believe that at midnight on the eve before the cataclysm they would be removed from the planet and spared from the destruction. In order for this to happen, they were instructed to wait inside certain identified parked cars and the spacemen would then transfer them from the parked cars to a flying saucer. Imposter cult members (three social psychologists) infiltrated the group and were able to observe firsthand over a period of weeks the buildup to these expectations and the reaction of the hardcore believers to

the shock of disconfirmation on December 21st when none of the events occurred as they expected.

When none of the events occurred as they expected, two of the hardcore cult members rejected their beliefs and left the group. But the other nine did not. Instead, they went through a period of intense rationalization over a period of hours. Many explanations were floated as the group wrestled with their catastrophic disappointment.[9] For example, they reasoned that the spacemen must have given them the wrong date. Another explanation was that the events had been postponed, possibly for years, so that more people could prepare to "meet their maker". Yet another was increasingly more complex: The message from the spacemen, which had them waiting in parked cars from which they would be moved to a flying saucer, must be symbolic because parked cars do not move and hence could not take anyone anywhere; therefore, the parked cars must symbolically refer to their physical bodies, and the flying saucer must symbolically refer to the importance of their own inner "strength, knowing, and light" for their rescue. The small group even considered leaving the disconfirmation unexplained while insisting that the plan had never gone astray, accepting that they did not have to understand everything for it all to still be essentially true.

During this rationalization period, one of the social psychologists feigned frustration and walked outside. One of the hardcore members, a medical doctor (Dr. Armstrong), followed and offered verbal support. Here are the words of a normal human being who has staked everything on a belief, only to have that belief cruelly disconfirmed by reality:

> I've had to go a long way. I've given up just about everything. I've cut every tie. I've burned every bridge. I've turned my back on the world. I can't afford to doubt. I have to believe. And there isn't any other truth.... I won't doubt even if we have to make an announcement to the press tomorrow and admit we were wrong. You're having your period of doubt now, but hang on boy, hang on. This is a tough time but we know that the boys upstairs are taking care of us.... These are tough times and the way is not easy. We all have to take a beating. I've taken a terrific one, but I have no doubt.[10]

In the end, the group settled on a rationalization provided by the group's leader which was based on a timely message she received from the spacemen. She said that the steadfast belief and waiting by their small group had brought so much "good and light" into the world, that God called off the pickup and the cataclysm.[11] This rationalization was jubilantly received by the group. Dr. Festinger explains:

> The group was able to accept and believe this explanation because they could support one another and convince each other that this was, in fact, a valid explanation. Although their belief was momentarily shaken by the disconfirmation, the members were able to maintain their membership in the movement because of the mutual social support which they received. Furthermore, the conviction of the members who had waited together did not show any signs of faltering several weeks after the disconfirmation (when the study was concluded). In fact, so powerful was the increased social support that two of the members who had occasionally expressed mild skepticism about a few tenets of the movement, now firmly believed all of them.[12]

Although the mental health of all the cult members was not open for examination, there was an opportunity for a professional psychiatrist to evaluate one of the hardcore cult members. The only reason this psychiatric examination was conducted was because relatives questioned the person's sanity and sought to gain custody of his children. The cult member, the medical doctor (Dr. Armstrong), and a believer in the cult all the way through the disconfirmation and beyond, was cleared by two court-appointed psychiatrists. The psychiatrists concluded that although Dr. Armstrong had some unusual ideas, he was "entirely normal".[13]

There have been two objections to Festinger's experiment. First, since the cult group studied was very small, there is no way to rule out the possibility that the three imposter cult members influenced the cult in a way that actually caused the results. To avoid this possibility would require infiltrating a much larger cult group and being present during a disconfirmation of beliefs. While I am sure there are many social psychologists who would love to do just that, I assume such opportunities are rare. This limitation of Festinger's experiment will be addressed

shortly when we turn to two examples of cognitive dissonance in much larger religious movements. The second problem sometimes cited with Festinger's cult group study is that it did not follow the cult members for longer than one month after the disconfirmation event. For all we know, belief in their rationalization only lasted a month and then faded away. Because of this, Festinger's cult group study is only useful for showing that a disconfirmation can produce new beliefs; it is not useful for showing that such new beliefs can be sustained. This limitation of Festinger's experiment will also be answered in the next two examples involving larger religious movements where the new beliefs were sustained. The basic theory of cognitive dissonance and cognitive dissonance reduction is summarized by Festinger:

> Suppose an individual believes something with his whole heart; suppose further that he has a commitment to this belief, that he has taken irrevocable actions because of it; finally, suppose that he is presented with evidence, unequivocal and undeniable evidence, that his belief is wrong: what will happen? The individual will frequently emerge, not only unshaken, but even more convinced of the truth of his beliefs than ever before....The dissonance [conflict between belief and reality] would be largely eliminated if they discarded the belief that had been disconfirmed....Indeed this pattern sometimes occurs....But frequently the behavioral commitment to the belief system is so strong that almost any other course of action is preferable....Believers may try to find reasonable explanations and very often they find ingenious ones....For rationalization to be fully effective, support from others is needed to make the explanation or the revision seem correct. Fortunately, the disappointed believer can usually turn to others in the same movement, who have the same dissonance and the same pressures to reduce it. Support for the new explanation is, hence, forthcoming.[14]

Between 1818 and 1844, there grew a large religious movement called the Millerites, started by a man named William Miller. He believed the Bible predicted Jesus' second coming would be sometime between March 21st 1843 and March 21st 1844. Followers were in the thousands across many cities. When March 21st 1844 came and went without incident, the

movement did not crumble. Instead, despite heavy ridicule, the groups founder and his apostles rationalized that there must have been some minor error in calculating the exact time, but the end was nevertheless still near. Another date came from a follower within the movement by the name of Reverend Samuel Snow. Despite the objections of the group's leaders that the exact date could not be known, Snow declared October 22nd 1844 as the new date for Jesus' second coming. Belief in this date by the Millerites took on a life of its own as described by a Millerite newspaper editor:

> At first the definite time was generally opposed; but there seemed to be an irresistible power attending its proclamation, which prostrated all before it. It swept over the land with the velocity of a tornado, and it reached hearts in different and distant places almost simultaneously, and in a manner which can be accounted for only on the supposition that God was [in] it....The lecturers among the Adventists were the last to embrace the views of the time....It was not until within about two weeks of the commencement of the seventh month [about the first of October; the writer is using the Jewish year], that we were particularly impressed with the progress of the movement, when we had such a view of it, that to oppose it, or even to remain silent longer, seemed to us to be opposing the work of the Holy Spirit; and in entering upon the work with all our souls, we could but exclaim, "What were we, that we should resist God?" It seemed to us to have been so independent of human agency, that we could but regard it as a fulfillment of the "midnight cry".[15]

Based on this new date, things reached an incredible pitch of fervor, zeal, and conviction. One of the elders in the Millerite movement described it this way:

> The "Advent Herald", "the Midnight Cry", and other Advent papers, periodicals, pamphlets, tracts, leaflets, voicing the coming glory, were scattered, broadcast and everywhere like autumn leaves in the forest. Every house was visited by them....A mighty effort through the Spirit and the word preached was made to bring sinners to repentance, and to have the wandering ones return.[16]

But October 22nd 1844 came and went with no second coming of Jesus. This second disconfirmation almost killed the movement, but still, yet another and this time much more complex rationalization emerged — the date had been correct, but Jesus' second coming had occurred in heaven not on earth, Jesus had begun an investigative judgment of the world, and when he is done he will return to earth, but no one knows exactly when.[17] This radical rationalization was sustained and continues to this day with membership in the millions. It is known as the Church of Seventh-day Adventists.

Before moving on to the third and final example of cognitive dissonance, it is worth briefly noting two other date specific second-coming-of-Jesus examples of cognitive dissonance. The sixteenth century Anabaptists believed the second coming of Jesus would occur in 1533. When the event did not take place, the movement, instead of crumbling, continued under the rationalization that "... the promised time had come, that no more Christian blood would be poured out, but that in a short time God would overthrow the tyrants and blood-shedders with all the rest of the wicked."[18] Noting another example, Leon Festinger says of the second-century Montanist movement:

> [It has] all the essential elements of the typical messianic movement. There are convinced followers; they commit themselves by uprooting their lives...the Second Advent does not occur. And, we note, far from halting the movement, this disconfirmation gives it new life.[19]

The final example of cognitive dissonance in larger religious movements is documented in a 1000 page tome by the late Gershom Scholem, President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities. This example of cognitive dissonance occurred in the seventeenth-century Jewish messianic movement of Sabbatai Sevi, a Jew who publicly proclaimed himself to be the messiah in 1665. Sevi, an adherent to a popular Jewish theology called Lurianic Kabbalism, was a charismatic manic-depressive who would deliberately and spectacularly break the law of Moses, eat forbidden foods and utter the sacred name of God, and then claim he had been inspired to do so by special revelation. Sabbatai gained a huge following spanning Italy, Holland, Germany, and Poland. His

followers thought he was to usher in a new age of redemption for Israel. Prophets wandered through the streets describing visions in which they had seen Sabbatai seated upon a throne. When Sabbatai traveled to Istanbul in 1666, he was arrested and imprisoned by Muslims. The Sultan gave him a choice between conversion to Islam or death. Sabbatai chose Islam. Gershom Scholem explains the effect of Sabbatai's shocking choice on his followers and the analogy with Christianity.

> [Of relevance here] is the collapse of earlier messianic movements as a result of disappointment. Initial reports turned out to be untrue, the messiah disappeared or was killed, and the movement petered out. This was the usual course of things.... The Sabbatian movement is the great exception to this rule: not only did history belie its message, but the disillusionment was so exceptionally cruel that normally it should have been the last nail to the movement's coffin. The messiah had apostatized and publicly betrayed his mission. If the movement did not die out there and then but survived the seemingly fatal crises, persisting for generations in various forms and metamorphoses, then its roots must have lain deeper than in local circumstances and conditions.... For a whole year or more the Jewish masses had been stirred in the depths of their soul by the tidings of redemption....Into this high-strung mood of enthusiasm and expectation, Sabbatai's apostasy burst like a bombshell, taking by surprise the messiah's closest associates as well as the most vehement unbelievers. Neither literary tradition nor the psychology of the ordinary Jew had envisaged the possibility of an apostate messiah....In order to survive, the movement had to develop an ideology that would enable its followers to live amid the tensions between inner and outer realities....The peculiar Sabbatian doctrines developed and crystallized with extraordinary rapidity in the years following the apostasy. Two factors were responsible for this, as for many similar developments in the history of religions: on the one hand, a deeply rooted faith, nourished by a profound and immediate experience...and, on the other hand, the ideological need to explain and rationalize the painful contradiction between historical reality and faith. The interaction of these two factors gave birth to Sabbatian theology, whose doctrine of the messiah was defined by the prophet

> Nathan in the years after the apostasy....When discussing the Sabbatian paradox by means of which cruel disappointment was turned into a positive affirmation of faith, *the analogy with early Christianity almost obtrudes itself* [emphasis added]....Both had to provide an ideology accounting for initial disappointment. Their master's death was a blow which the disciples of Jesus could overcome only by cultivating the image of his resurrection and the hope in his triumphal return as lord and judge....Both Christianity and the Sabbatian movement took as their point of departure the ancient Jewish paradox of the Suffering Servant which, however, they stressed with such radicalism that they practically stood it on its head....The early Christians believed in the return of the crucified after his ascension to Heaven. The Sabbatians too believed that the redeemers absence (a moral absence after his apostasy, a physical absence after his death) was temporary only and that he would return before long to achieve his messianic mission....In order to maintain the faith in the messiah it was not enough to justify his apostasy: it had to be justified in traditional Jewish terms.[20]

Scholem goes on to emphasize just how radical their rationalization was:

> The resultant doctrine was necessarily novel and even heretical in terms of traditional Judaism. The doctrine of the messiah as expounded by Nathan of Gaza and his disciples during the ten years following the apostasy emphasized three novel points....[1] Redemption had begun, but had yet to be fully realized and consummated amid pain and suffering — including the anguishing shame of the messiah's apostasy....[2] All other saints had "raised" the holy sparks from the depths of the *qelippah* while keeping themselves aloof from the danger zone. Only the messiah performed the terrible *descensus ad inferos*....[3] Lurianic kabbalah had taught [that]... evil existed by virtue of the vitality which it drew from the sparks of good that it had snatched and held imprisoned. Once these sparks were released and "raised," evil, impotent and lifeless as it is by itself, would automatically collapse. At this point, Sabbatian doctrine introduces a dialectical twist into the Lurianic idea. According to the new, Sabbatian version, it is not enough to extract

> the sparks of holiness from the realm of impurity. In order to accomplish its mission, the power of holiness — as incarnate in the messiah — has to descend into impurity, and good has to assume the form of evil. This mission is fraught with danger, as it appears to strengthen the power of evil before its final defeat. During Sabbatai's lifetime the doctrinal position was that by entering the realm of the *qelippah*, good had become evil *in appearance* only. But there were more radical possibilities waiting to be explored: only the complete transformation of good into evil would exhaust the full potential of the later and thereby explode it, as it were, from within.... It was along such lines that the subsequent theology of the Sabbatian radical developed.[21]

Scholem also notes a major difference between Sabbatianism and Christianity:

> ... the structural similarities must not blind us to the profound differences between early Christianity and Sabbatianism. Each of the two movements has its own historical, religious, and psychological horizon....An even more important factor is the decisive role played by their respective central personalities. Sabbatai Sevi, in spite of the undoubted fascination which he exercised on others, lacked greatness both of character and of expression. It was not he who made the messianic movement, but the faith of the masses which, in an explosive discharge of messianic energies accumulated during many generations, swept him to the heights of messiahship...unlike Christianity, at the heart of which there stands a great personality.[22]

All of the examples above show that extraordinary rationalizations to disconfirming events, while rare, are a normal human mechanism. It is also worth noting that when cognitive dissonance results in a new belief, the historical record leaves little or no trace of the cause. The new belief just appears, seemingly out of thin air, and it either catches on with others or it does not.

Cognitive Dissonance Applied To Christian Origins

In 1956, Festinger made only passing comment on how his theory related to Christian origins. He noted that the applicability of cognitive dissonance to Jesus' followers rested on the question of whether or not Jesus' followers were surprised by his death. If Jesus predicted his death was a necessary thing to his followers, then his death would not have been a disconfirmation of beliefs and therefore could not have caused cognitive dissonance. However, Festinger notes that if Jesus' followers had no expectation of a dead messiah, "[then] the crucifixion and the cry Jesus uttered on the cross were indeed an unequivocal disconfirmation."[23]

It is unknown what Festinger's access to New Testament scholarship was in 1956, but many New Testament scholars today doubt the historicity of the gospel accounts of Jesus predicting his own death (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; Mt 17:23; 20:19; Lk 9:22; 18:33; 24:7; Jn 2:19). The Jesus Seminar concludes that all of these predictions were put on Jesus' lips after his death as a form of legendary embellishment that Jesus knew all along exactly what was going to happen.[24] Although Jesus' followers must have been aware that Jesus was putting himself in a precarious situation by going to Jerusalem and by instigating the incident at the temple, if they had already begun to hope or think that he might be the messiah, they probably never imagined that God would let events get so out of hand that the messiah would be put to death. Jesus' most ardent followers may even have imagined that the Jerusalem authorities, or at least some of them, might see the same greatness they saw in Jesus. If Jesus' followers had no expectation of his death, then just like any human beings, they would have been subject to the powerful influence of cognitive dissonance and the desire to reduce that dissonance through rationalization when faced with Jesus' crucifixion.

Paul M. van Buren considers there to be three possible origins to the earliest belief that Jesus died for our sins and was raised: a discovered empty tomb, a visual experience of Jesus after his death, or "the discovery of a new and positive way in which to speak of Jesus' death and of Jesus after his death, that is, a new way of perceiving Jesus, was itself the event of Easter."[25] This latter possibility is exactly what is being proposed here.

Like the earlier examples of cognitive dissonance, a sustaining rationalization for Jesus' death would most likely have emerged very rapidly and in the presence of others who could offer mutual encouragement. Therefore, if after Jesus' death his inner circle fled

Jerusalem as a group back to Galilee, it seems most likely that it was on that several day trek, or very shortly after, that the ideas contained in 1 Cor 15:3-4 were born. Their rationalization did not need to be perfect, but it did need to adequately answer what would seem to be the two most natural and pressing questions: Why did the messiah have to die, and how can a dead person be the messiah?

I suggest that these two pressing questions drove an initial rationalization amongst some of Jesus' followers that answered with 1] Jesus died for our sins and 2] Jesus will be back soon to reign as the messiah should. The second part of the proposed rationalization is not expressed in the 1 Cor 15:3-7 beliefs and traditions. However, we know that the imminent return of Jesus and the ushering in of a new kingdom was widely believed throughout the early Christian communities (1 Thess 4:13-18; 1 Cor 1:6-8; 7:25-31; Rom 13:11-12; Phil 1:6-10; Mk 8:38-9:1; 13:24-31); therefore, this belief could have existed much earlier and been a part of the initial rationalization.

If Jesus was going to come back soon to reign as the messiah should, a third component of the rationalization automatically follows — Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Although Jesus' followers could have reasoned that he would resurrect later, at the time he was to begin his reign and perhaps at the same time ushering in the general resurrection, I hope to show below that Jewish and surrounding Greek beliefs would have favored the conclusion that Jesus was raised up to heaven and would later return from there.

The main question in defending the three part rationalization above is whether or not there was sufficient raw material in the Jewish and surrounding Greek culture to feed such a rationalization? The answer is that there was plenty. Below is a summary of the religious and cultural influences which would have served as raw material for the rationalization that Jesus "died for our sins" and "was raised".

Jesus Died for Our Sins

John Dominic Crossan notes that first-century Judaism and its surrounding Greek culture was rich with the theme of atoning sacrifice by blood:

> The world of Paul's time took it for granted that sacrifice was how you established and maintained peaceful unity with a god, a goddess, the gods, or God. You offered something that belonged to you to the divine. It could be as small as a libation, the first sip of wine poured out before a private banquet, or as large as a hecatomb, one hundred oxen slain before a public temple.... Everyone in Paul's world, Jews and pagan alike, understood that "reconciliation" could involve "a sacrifice of atonement by blood".[26]

In Judaism, the theme of sacrifice also had a sense of "measure for measure" when dealing with God, that is, the sacrifice was proportional to the need or reward.[27] One Jewish tradition that reflects this idea of measure for measure sacrifice in return for God's blessing is the account of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac (Gen 22:1-19). In this account, Abraham is ordered by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham ties his son up, and with knife in hand ready for the killing, an angel from God tells him to stop. But Abraham's *willingness* to sacrifice his son is rewarded:

> ...because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies. (Gen 22:16-17)

This tradition of the near-sacrifice of Isaac reflects the idea that when dealing with God, everything is measure for measure; you get back in equal measure that which you give. Abraham was *required* to be willing to sacrifice Isaac in order to get the blessings for Israel in return. In effect, the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, even though unaccomplished, was a vicarious sacrifice on behalf of Israel.

By the first century, the Abraham/Isaac story had undergone modification to further accentuate its vicarious sacrifice theme. Now, Abraham's son Isaac is depicted as a *willing* sacrifice, an idea that is not present in the original Genesis story. This idea is captured in a retelling of the Abraham/Isaac story by the Jewish historian Josephus: "Now Isaac was twenty-five years old.... Isaac was of such a generous disposition as

became the son of such a father, and was pleased with this discourse.... So he went immediately to the altar to be sacrificed" (Antiquities of the Jews 1.13.2-4).

Use of the Abraham/Isaac vicarious sacrifice theme was not just confined to what transpired in the past between Abraham and Isaac. It was also used by first-century Jews to help them make sense of present difficult situations. This is reflected in a first-century Jewish passage where it was said to Jewish martyrs before they went into battle: "Remember whence you came and at the hand of what father Isaac gave himself to be sacrificed for piety's sake" (4 Maccabees 13:12). Here, the soon to be martyrs are told that their sacrifice is "for piety's sake", that is, theirs is a vicarious sacrifice for the sake of Israel as a whole. First-century Jews were comparing Isaac's unaccomplished sacrifice to the present real deaths of Jewish martyrs.

Although the theme of willing, measure for measure, vicarious sacrifice had strong attachments to the Abraham/Isaac tradition, it also became a standalone theme that by the first century could be expressed without specific reference to Abraham or Isaac. The language of "atonement for sins" also materialized by the first century. Both concepts are captured in this first-century Jewish text which is speaking of already martyred comrades:

> These, then, who have been consecrated for the sake of God, are honored, not only with this honor, but also by the fact that because of them our enemies did not rule over our nation, the tyrant was punished, and the homeland purified — they having become, as it were, *a ransom for the sin of our nation.* And through the blood of those devout ones and *their death as an atoning sacrifice*, divine Providence preserved Israel... (4 Maccabees 17:20-22, emphasis added)

Even if the above phrase "ransom for the sin of our nation" is a form of metaphor, as is suggested by the phrase preceding it "as it were", a metaphor is still a way of expressing ideas that you either cannot yet come right out and say, or as a way of saying what you want to say but qualifying it so that you can claim you are not really saying it. Addressing the use of this phrase in later Judaism, Gershom Scholem notes, "[The

Jews] neutralize[d] their daring utterances by a qualifying 'as it were' or 'so to speak.' With the aid of this formal reservation they attenuated their symbols in appearance but saved them in reality."[28]

Van Buren makes the connection between the above 4 Maccabees passage and the early Christian belief that Jesus died for our sins:

> The principle of measure for measure, coupled with the association of the Maccabean martyrs with Isaac, also accounts for [a]...phrase in 4 Maccabees (17:21), which calls their deaths "a ransom for the sin of our nation, as it were." The affirmation of the next verse is even more striking (17:22): "Through the blood of these righteous ones and through the propitiation of their death the divine providence rescued Israel..." In Romans 3:25 Paul used the same word — *hilasterion*, "propitiation" — with reference to Christ's death.... [The] language of the primitive gospel seems very much at home in the interpretive world of the Jewish literature in which the *aqedah* [the Abraham/Isaac tradition] was developing.[29]

But if Jesus' followers concluded that God offered up his beloved son as a sacrifice, to whom did Jesus' followers think the offering was being made to? Van Buren answers, "The question has no answer, perhaps because it is irrelevant. What matters is that the principle of 'measure for measure' has been radicalized — one might say extended to the breaking point..."[30] Gershom Scholem agrees, "Both Christianity and the Sabbatian movement took as their point of departure the ancient Jewish paradox of the Suffering Servant which, however, they stressed with such radicalism that they practically stood it on its head."[31]

In conclusion, there was plenty of raw material in the Jewish tradition and surrounding Greek culture for Jesus' followers to rationalize that Jesus "died for our sins".

Jesus was Raised

According to Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, first-century Jewish beliefs were very diverse:

> In the case of Judaism in the first centuries BC and AD, for example, we find a variety of documents that scarcely intersect. If we invoke any criterion we think likely to characterize a variety of writings — a single doctrine concerning the Torah, the Messiah, the definition of who and what is "Israel," for example — we find no one answer present in all writings, and no point of agreement which unites them. Not only so, but both archaeological and text analysis insist that the various writings were produced by diverse groups and do not speak for one and the same community at all....[In] antiquity as today, many Judaisms competed....[The] dogma of a single, valid Judaism contradicts the facts of history at every point in the history of Judaism.[32]

This diversity in first-century Jewish beliefs can be seen in their beliefs about the general resurrection — the Pharisees and Sadducees could not even agree that there would be such a thing (the Pharisees said yes, the Sadducees said no). Within this mix of Jewish beliefs about the general resurrection, there was another belief that was not exactly the same as resurrection, but was similar. It was the belief that great prophets were bodily assumed up to heaven *before* death. For example, the Old Testament has this occur to both Enoch and Elijah (Gen 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11; see too Heb 11:5 in the New Testament). Moses too may have been thought by some Jews to have received the privilege of live bodily assumption. Speaking of Moses, the Old Testament says, "He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day" (Deut 34:6). Belief by some Jews in Moses' bodily assumption is more clearly expressed in the first-century writing of Philo Judaeus:

> ...the end of virtuous and holy men is not death but a translation and migration, and an approach to some other place of abode.... [In] this instance something marvelous did take place; for he [Enoch] was supposed to be carried off in such a way as to be invisible, for then he was not found.... This mercy also was bestowed on the great prophet [Moses], for his sepulcher also was known to no one. And besides these two there was another, Elijah, who ascended from the things of

> earth into heaven... (Philo Judaeus, Questions and Answers on Genesis, Book I, #86)

The Jewish historian Josephus also alludes to belief in Moses' bodily assumption:

> Now as he went thence to the place where he was to vanish out of their sight, they all followed after him weeping... and as he was going to embrace Eleazar and Joshua, and was still discoursing with them, a cloud stood over him on the sudden, and he disappeared in a certain valley, although he wrote in the holy books that he died, which was done out of fear, lest they should venture to say that, because of his extraordinary virtue, he went to God. (Antiquities of the Jews 4.8.48)

Some Jews may have thought that still others would receive the privilege of live bodily assumption. Based on a comparison of Ugaritic texts to clarify the meaning of Hebrew texts, Mitchell Dahood of the Pontifical Biblical Institute says of the authors of Psalms 16:10, 49:15, and 73:24 (below), "The psalmist firmly believes that he will be granted the same privilege accorded Enoch and Elijah; he is convinced that God will assume him to himself, without suffering the pains of death."[33]

> Ps 16:10: "For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit."

> Ps 49:15: "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me."

> Ps 73:24: "You guide me with your counsel, and afterwards you will receive me to glory."

There is also an example of Jews experimenting with belief in bodily assumption *after* death. In the Testament of Job, written sometime between the first century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., the bodies of two children killed in the collapse of a house are thought to have been assumed up to heaven:

> She asked him [the commanders of some soldiers] saying: “I ask as favor of you, my Lords, that you order your soldiers that they should dig among the ruins of our house which fell upon my children, so that their bones could be brought in a perfect state to the tombs...” [As the narrator of the story, the woman’s husband then says,] And the kings gave order that the ruins of my house should be dug up. But I prohibited it, saying ‘‘Do not go to the trouble in vain; for my children will not he found, for they are in the keeping of their Maker and Ruler’’. And the kings answered and said: “Who will gainsay that he is out of his mind and raves? For while we desire to bring the bones of his children back, he forbids us to do so saying: ‘They have been taken and placed in the keeping of their Maker’. Therefore prove unto us the truth”. But I said to them: “Raise me that I may stand up”, and they lifted me, holding up my arms from both sides. And I stood upright, and pronounced first the praise of God and after the prayer I said to them: ‘‘Look with your eyes to the East’’. And they looked and saw my children with crowns near the glory of the King, the Ruler of heaven. And when my wife Sitis saw this, she fell to the ground and prostrated [herself] before God, saying: ‘‘Now I know that my memory remains with the Lord”. (Testament of Job 40)[34]

The Jewish belief in the general resurrection and in the bodily assumption of individuals both before and after death was probably rooted in feelings of the just reign of God. Since this world is far from fair, God would make things right in a future mass resurrection, vindicating the righteous and punishing the wicked, a measure for measure recompense by God according to what each person was due but did not receive in this life. The bodily assumption of great prophets up to heaven was a reward for one’s supreme moral virtue, and the assumption of dead children was an answer to the meaningless loss of innocence.

The surrounding Greek culture also had raised heroes. Although such beliefs were usually centered on a person’s raised “soul”, such as the belief by most people in Jesus’ time that the emperor Augustus had been raised from the dead, there were also beliefs that the bodies of special people were sometimes assumed or translated to the place of the gods before or at the time of death. Here are four such examples:

Herakles, having abandoned hope for himself [he was ill], ascended the pyre and asked each one who came up to him to light it.... [Philoctetes] lit the pyre. Immediately lightning fell from the heavens and the pyre was wholly consumed. After this, when the companions of Iolaus came to gather up the bones of Herakles and found not a single bone anywhere, they assumed that, in accordance with the words of the oracle, he had passed among men into the company of the gods. (Diodorus of Sicily, Library of History 4:38:3-5, written in the first century B.C.E.)[35]

A severe battle took place not far from Lavinium and many were slain on both sides, but when night came the armies separated; and when the body of Aeneas was nowhere to be seen, some concluded that it had been translated to the gods... (Dionysus of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities 1.64.4-5, written in the first century B.C.E. or the first decade or two of the first century C.E.)[36]

Romulus, when he vanished [after a battle], left neither the least part of his body, nor any remnant of his cloths to be seen....[The] senators suffered them not to search, or busy themselves about the matter, but commanded them to honor and worship Romulus as one taken up to the gods. (Plutarch, Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans, Romulus 2:27, written in the first or early second century C.E. with Romulus living in the eighth century B.C.E.)[37]

Xisouthros got out [of a boat], with his wife and daughter and with the helmsman, and he kissed the ground and dedicated an alter and sacrificed to the gods. Then he and those who had disembarked with him disappeared. Those who had remained on the boat and did not get out with Xisouthros then got out and looked for him, calling for him by name; but Xisouthros himself was no more to be seen by them. Then a voice came from up in the air, commanding that they should honor the gods. For Xisouthros had gone to dwell with the gods because of his piety; and his wife and daughter and the helmsman had shared in the same honor. (Berossos, Babyloniaca, third century B.C.E.,

preserved in Syncellus, Ecloga Chronographica 55, ninth century C.E.)[38]

According to Stephen Patterson:

> In the broader Hellenistic world, it was commonplace to speak of great heroic individuals who had been taken up to dwell among the gods as a reward for and the vindication of a life well lived. This tradition, too, would have been influential in the Hellenized Jewish environment of the first century, and it no doubt influenced the formulation of early Christian claims about Jesus.[39]

That the surrounding Greek culture had ideas that were similar to and therefore could have been influential in the formation of the Christian belief that Jesus was raised from the dead, is also evident in this statement by second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr when speaking to pagans:

> When we say... that He, Jesus Christ, our Teacher, was crucified and died, and rose again, and ascended into heaven, we propound nothing different from what you believe regarding those whom you esteem sons of Jupiter. (Justin Martyr, First Apology, Chapter 21)

Justin Martyr then goes on to explain this similarity between Christian and pagan belief as a case of the devil, knowing ahead of time that Jesus' resurrection and ascension were prophesied in the Jewish scriptures, creating *imitations* of resurrecting and ascending people in Greek mythology *before* the time of Jesus:

> But those who hand down the myths which the poets have made... have been uttered by the influence of the wicked demons, to deceive and lead astray the human race. For having heard it proclaimed through the prophets that the Christ was to come... the devil... said that Bacchus... having been torn in pieces, he ascended into heaven. And he [the devil]... gave out that Bellerophon... ascended to heaven on his horse Pegasus. And when they heard it said... [that Jesus would] by His own means ascend into heaven, they pretended that Perseus was spoken of. (Justin Martyr, First Apology, Chapter 54.

> This concept is also expressed by Justin Martyr in his Dialogue with Trypho, Chapters 69-70)

Given the diverse mixing pot of ideas — belief in bodily resurrection of the masses at the end of time, belief in bodily assumption of great prophets before death and of children after death, belief in raised souls and bodies of Hellenistic heroes, belief in vindication of the righteous, a sense of justice about what ought to be — and given the inescapable reality of Jesus' death, there was plenty of raw material and creative potential for the belief to emerge that Jesus was bodily raised to heaven after death. As Stephen Patterson says:

> Peter...and John...had known Jesus and had been in his company. Long before his death, they had committed themselves fully to Jesus' vision of the Empire of God. They believed in his cause as God's cause. It was people like these who would have been the first to say, "God raised Jesus from the dead"....Just as they had given themselves over to this cause during Jesus' lifetime, so now they would give themselves over to the belief that God would not allow the cross to remain as the final word on Jesus' life....It was not necessary for Christians to have had experiences of the risen Jesus, or to have discovered an empty tomb, in order to say this. They could have said it, and would have, even if Jesus' body had been [buried]...and never seen again.[40]

Belief in the raised souls and bodies of Hellenistic heroes, belief in the vindication of the righteous, and especially Jewish belief in the bodily assumption of great prophets, would have favored this rationalization over one in which Jesus stayed dead and then resurrected when his reign was to begin.

It is important to reemphasize that radical rationalizations in response to cognitive dissonance are not an everyday occurrence. There are probably thousands of cult groups that died at the first big disconfirmation of their beliefs. For example, the death of would be messiah Simon bar Giora in 70 C.E. ended that messianic movement. Perhaps the right circumstances and/or social and psychological mixture were not there to

build a sustaining rationalization for Simon's defeat. That his was a military movement which was crushed militarily probably also added to the difficulty of forming some sustainable rationalization. As James Crossley notes about this and another messianic movement, "Simon bar Giora [70 C.E.] and bar Kochbah [135 C.E.] were military figures expecting military victories. Of course their deaths would be deemed as a failure."[41]

Although cognitive dissonance often does not lead to the emergence of new beliefs, we know that it can, sometimes with spectacular results. Given the circumstances Jesus' followers were faced with, and given the above ingredients from the Jewish and Greek culture that they were a part of, it is not surprising that the Christian rationalization arose that Jesus died for our sins and was raised (and will return soon). Such a rationalization is no less plausible than the radical rationalizations we know occurred in the Sabbatai Sevi movement in response to his apostasy, the Millerite movement in response to Jesus' no show at his Second Coming, and Festinger's cult group in response to the lack of world cataclysm on the date they expected it.

"In Accordance with the Scriptures"

The earliest Christians were convinced that Jesus' atoning death and resurrection were "in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4). An urgent desire to anchor their rationalization in scripture would be expected not only to validate their rationalization to themselves, but also to validate it to other followers of Jesus and to defend themselves against those who might criticize their beliefs. Robert Miller describes how the Jews viewed their sacred scriptures:

> [Jews] treated the words of the prophets as coded messages beyond the prophets' own understanding....Thus the real meaning of some...prophecies could be discerned only after the predicted events had already occurred. First-century Jews...believed that God had planted throughout their writings cryptic clues about his plans for the future.[42]

While the search for scriptural confirmation of beliefs would have been enhanced by literacy and access to a copy of the Jewish scriptures,

neither would have been required. As Van Buren points out:

> There is no need to imagine the disciples retiring to a Beth Midrash and pouring over texts. For all we know, they may have been unable to read. But as Jews they would have heard the Torah read again and again...[43]

Out of the thousands of verses in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is not surprising that some could be interpreted in favor of a dying and rising messiah instead of the earthly triumphant King that had been expected by most Jews. Van Buren comments on the creativity of this interpretive process:

> To listen to... many a...Christian, is to listen to just this mistake, as though a Jew must be either blind, stupid, or perverted not to see what is so obvious to a Christian. Such Christians fail to recognize that Jews have continued to read these texts with the closest attention over the centuries without seeing them as pointing to the gospel. They [Christians] fail as well to acknowledge their own foundations in the highly creative interpretation of Israel's scriptures.[44]

It is worth noting too that, like Christianity, the Sabbatai Sevi movement found everything they needed in the Jewish scriptures. According to Gershom Scholem:

> Sabbatai's followers...believed in the holy books. Hence their first reaction — one might almost say reflex — was to search Scripture and tradition for intimations, hints, and indications of the extraordinary and bewildering events. And lo and behold — the Bible, rabbinic Haggadah, and kabbalistic literature turned out to abound in allusions to Sabbatai Sevi in general and to the mystery of his apostasy in particular....From biblical verses and fragments of verses, from rabbinic sayings whose implicit possibilities nobody had noticed before, from paradoxical expressions in kabbalistic literature, and from the oddest corners of Jewish literature, they produced material the like of which had never been seen in Jewish theology.[45]

Although it is impossible at this distance to know exactly which scriptures the earliest Christians had in mind, the most likely candidates are those which appear in the later Christian literature. For the belief that Jesus "died for our sins" some possibilities are: Isa 53:1, 3, 4, 11, 12; Zech 11:13; 12:10; 13:7; Ps 22:1, 18; and Ps 69:4. For the belief that Jesus was "raised" some possibilities are: Ps 2:7; 16:10; 49:15; 68:18; 86:13; 110:1; Isa 25:8; Jon 1:17; and Hos 6:2. It would take volumes to respond to those who think that all of these passages are in fact actual predictions of the future. Although such an exercise is well beyond my scope here, a representative in-depth analysis will be done on one of the most significant of these passages later (Ps 16:10).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is plausible that cognitive dissonance was the cause of the beliefs that Jesus died for our sins and was raised and that scriptural confirmation for these beliefs could be found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Chapter 4

The Appearance Traditions

1 Cor 15:5-8: "... he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me [Paul]."

If Jesus did not resurrect from the dead, what plausibly could have caused the rise of these early appearance traditions? The answer has several components.

It is easiest to start with the appearance to Cephas (Peter) because an *individual* seeing a dead person is not unusual or controversial at all. As resurrection defender N.T. Wright says, "Most people in the ancient world knew that visions and appearances of recently dead people occurred.... That such 'seeings', even such 'meetings', occur, and that people have known about them throughout recorded history, there should be no question."[1] Still, it is worth taking a closer look at such individual sightings if only to firm up what is already widely agreed upon. (Although appearances of dead people will be referred to as "hallucinations" below, the result of this chapter is the same if one thinks these experiences are actual visitations of dead people from some sort of afterlife.)

According to Dr. Peter Slade and Dr. Richard Bentall:

> ... particular kinds of stress may elicit hallucinatory experiences. The clearest example of this concerns hallucination following bereavement.... [In] a study of recently widowed men and women, [it was] estimated that no less than 13.3 percent of the sample had experienced hallucinations of the deceased spouse's voice. Other authors have noted the occurrence of visual hallucinations associated with grief in the elderly.... The finding of a relationship between

> hallucination and grief has been replicated across cultures.... [Among] the Hopi Indians of North America nonpsychotic people often hallucinate the presence of a recently deceased family member.[2]

Slade and Bentall also point out that not counting drug use or mental illness, various studies over the last hundred years indicate that around 1 out of 10 people have experienced a brief auditory or visual hallucination of a dead person, with visual hallucinations being more common than auditory hallucinations.[3] These studies also indicate that around 1% of the populace has experienced a visual hallucination of a dead person which includes actual conversation with the hallucination.[4] In more superstitious cultures, such as that of first-century Palestine, the incidence of hallucination is higher. One informal study found that 40% of Hawaiian natives have had auditory or visual encounters with dead people.[5]

The following three first-hand accounts from modern times serve as examples of the kind of realistic visionary experience it is proposed here was experienced by Peter (the last one is a vision of Jesus).

> When I was nine I lost my father. I was inconsolable and mourned him for many years.... Then one Christmas Eve I had gone to bed but had planned to go to Midnight Mass. It was just time for me to get up when I was overcome by terrible stomach colic and had to stay in bed. The pain soon passed off, but then it was too late for Mass. So I stayed in bed. Suddenly I heard the door open and there were soft footsteps with a strange noise of knocking — I was alone at home and was rather frightened. Then the miracle happened — my beloved father came towards me, shining and lovely as gold, and transparent as mist. He looked just as he did in life. I could recognize his features quite distinctly, then he stopped beside my bed and looked at me lovingly and smiled. A great peace entered into me and I felt happier than I had felt before.... Then he went away.[6]

> In a neighboring village there was a very dear, religious woman whom I knew. I heard she had died and made up my mind to go to her funeral. It was on the day of the funeral, about eleven in the morning. I was just preparing the fire in the stove when suddenly I felt I was

> not alone — I turned round, and there this woman stood behind me. She was transparent but perfect in her glory and beauty. Her hair, gray in her lifetime, was wonderfully fair and curled halfway down her arms. Her face was clear and white, her eyes were shining, and her teeth in her smiling mouth were beautiful. Her dress, which reached up to her chin, and the sleeves which fell down over her wrists, were of an unearthly splendor.[7]
>
> The thoughts tumbled over and over in my mind. Can society forgive one for such acts against humanity? Can it take this guilt off my shoulders? Can serving the rest of life in prison undo what's been done? Can anything be done? I looked at my future, my alternatives. Stay in prison. Escape. Commit suicide. As I looked, the wall in my mind was blank. But somehow I knew there was another alternative. I could choose the road many people had been pressing on me. I could follow Jesus. As plainly as daylight came the words, "You have to decide. Behold, I stand at the door and knock." Did I hear someone say that? I assume I spoke in my thoughts, but I'm not certain, "What door?" "You know what door and where it is Susan. Just turn around and open it, and I will come in." Suddenly, as though on a movie screen, there in my thoughts was a door. It had a handle. I took hold of it and pulled. It opened. The whitest, most brilliant light I had ever seen poured over me. In the center of the flood of brightness was an even brighter light. Vaguely, there was the form of a man. I knew it was Jesus. He spoke to me — literally, plainly, matter-of-factly spoke to me in my 9-by-11 prison cell: "Susan, I am really coming into your heart to stay." I was distinctly aware that I inhaled deeply, and then, just as fully, exhaled. There was no more guilt! It was gone. Completely gone! The bitterness, too, instantly gone. How could this be? For the first time in my memory I felt clean, fully clean, inside and out. In 26 years I had never been so happy.[8]

If Peter believed Jesus was raised from the dead, it would not be surprising if he had a hallucination of Jesus like the type described above. Such an experience would have in turn bolstered Peter's conviction that Jesus was raised.

Other Individual Appearances

After Peter had his hallucination of Jesus, it would have been natural for him to share his experience with his closest companions, such closest companions probably by definition sharing his belief and zeal in Jesus' resurrection. Given their belief that Jesus was raised, and now given the idea that Jesus had appeared to Peter, it would not be surprising if a few of them too had individual hallucinations of Jesus. As these experiences were revealed to the larger Jesus community, it would likewise not be surprising if individual hallucinations of Jesus spread to a moderate number of people there too. That beliefs and expectations can combine to produce a moderate chain reaction of individual hallucinations is evident even in a modern setting. For example, a few weeks after a massive tsunami hit Asia in December of 2004, ABC News reported:

> A second surge of tsunami terror is hitting southern Thailand, but this time it is a wave of foreign ghosts terrifying locals in what health experts described as an outpouring of delayed mass trauma. Tales of ghost sightings in the six worst hit southern provinces have become endemic, with many locals saying they are too terrified to venture near the beach or into the ocean.... "This is a type of mass hallucination that is a cue to the trauma being suffered by people who are missing so many dead people, and seeing so many dead people, and only talking about dead people," Thai psychologist and media commentator Wallop Piyamanotham said.... Mr. Wallop said widespread trauma began to set in about four days after the waves hit. "This is when people start seeing these farangs (foreigners) walking on the sand or in the ocean," he said....Mr. Wallop said the reason almost all ghost sightings appear to involve foreign tourists stems from a belief that spirits can only be put to rest by relatives at the scene, such as was done to many Thai victims. "Thai people believe that when people die, a relative has to cremate them or bless them. If this is not done or the body is not found, people believe the person will appear over and over again to show where they are," he said.[9]

Gershom Scholem notes a similar contagious and belief driven spread of hallucinations in the first year of the seventeenth century messianic

movement of Sabbatai Sevi:

> Tales of the appearance of a pillar of fire and similar miraculous signs became indisputable facts. The people of Smyrna saw miracles and heard prophecies, providing the best possible illustration of Renan's remark about the infectious character of visions. It is enough for one member of a group sharing the same beliefs to claim to have seen or heard a supernatural manifestation, and the others too will see and hear it. Hardly had the report arrived from Aleppo that Elijah had appeared in the Old Synagogue there, and Elijah walked the streets of Smyrna. Dozens, even hundreds, had seen him...[10]

In addition to individual hallucinations in the early Christian community, *groups* of followers probably shared in collective spiritual experiences, perhaps similar to what one would find today at a spirited Pentecostal gathering. We know that such group experiences were occurring in the later Christian community because Paul refers to them (1 Cor 14:1-33; 12:1-11; 1 Thess 5:19), so they were probably occurring in the earliest Christian community too. In these gatherings, probably nobody saw or heard Jesus, but all would have agreed that Jesus was present. If there were individual hallucinations and collective spiritual experiences, there was probably everything in between. It will be assumed below that the earliest Christians knew the difference between *visually* seeing Jesus and an ecstatic experience where his presence was just felt, but this line may have been fuzzier than we think.

The Appearance to James and to Paul

1 Cor 15:7-8: "Then he appeared to James....Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me [Paul]."

Although not part of the appearance traditions in 1 Cor 15:3-7, it is worth first looking at Paul's own encounter with Jesus approximately three years after Jesus' death and which he refers to in 1 Cor 15:8 above. Although Acts says other people witnessed this appearance with Paul (Acts 9:1-9; 22:6-11; 26:12-18) the account in Acts could be a legendary

embellishment on what was originally just a solo experience and this is how it will be treated here.

Because the appearance to Paul marks his conversion from persecutor to leader of Christians, there have been attempts to hypothesize the exact psychological dynamics that took place within Paul's mind that led him to have such an experience. However, without the ability to question Paul himself, these cannot be any more than educated guesses. Nevertheless, below are a few possibilities. According to Gerd Ludemann:

> [In his letters,] Paul shows clear evidence of conflicting emotions: a radical sense of guilt and unworthiness combined with an exalted self-image that results in the need to be an authority figure.... Caught up in an intellectual and emotional maelstrom that can only have been intensified by his growing familiarity with the sect he was harassing, he seems at last to have discovered the resolution of his problems for himself. The humble and self-sacrificing Jesus represents for Paul a new vision of the Almighty: no longer a stern and demanding tyrant intent on punishing even those who could not help themselves, but a loving and forgiving leader who offered rest and peace to imperfect humans who accepted his grace.... Paul could become the Apostle-in-Chief of a new program of salvation with a culture-wide appeal. Something of that nature was in all likelihood the dynamic that impelled the persecutor turned proclaimer whose religious zeal stands as a measure of the inner tension that was powerfully released and transformed in a vision of Christ.[11]

Richard Carrier provides a similar explanation:

> ... guilt at persecuting a people he came to admire; subsequent disgust with fellow persecuting Pharisees; ... beginning to see what the Christians were seeing in scripture, and to worry about his own salvation;... heat and fatigue on a long, desolate road... could have induced a convincing ecstatic event — his unconscious mind producing what he really wanted: a reason to believe the Christians were right after all and atone for his treatment of them, and a way to give his life meaning, by relocating himself from the lower, even superfluous periphery of Jewish elite society, to a place of power and

> purpose. We can add to this the possibility of benevolent mental disorder. We know there is a kind of “happy schizotype” who is “a relatively well-adjusted person who is functional despite, and in some cases even because of, his or her anomalous perceptual experiences”.... It is entirely possible that cultural support and psychological benefits led borderline schizophrenics into comfortable situations where their visions were channeled into “appropriate” and respected religious contexts. Indeed, we would expect these “happy schizotypes” to find their most accepted place in religious avocations, and they would naturally gravitate into the entourage of miracle workers.[12]

The comments of Evan Fales, applying the work of anthropologist I.M. Lewis on mystical experiences in general, may also have some application to Paul’s conversion appearance:

> Central possession... typically begins with involuntary affliction interpreted as a mystical invasion; it involves gradual mastery of that affliction (and of the invading spirits); and it is a technique which, successfully deployed, is a means to social status and power.... [The] invading spirit is a deity of the central cult, and is therefore a representative and guardian of the moral and institutional order.... The victim must be someone whose social background places him (the gender here is usually male) in a position to aspire to social authority.... However, there is a pattern. In those societies in which access to power is determined ascriptively — normally, by the passing of office from father to son or from uncle to nephew — possession does not occur. Possession is a concomitant of what are sometimes called “big-man” societies, societies in which any man (or any man from the appropriate social class) can compete for social authority. Such societies are more fluid, more meritocratic; and in them, power comes to those who have the greatest initiative or are the most charismatic. It is in that context that someone can claim [that]... he has been involuntarily chosen by the gods as their medium for communicating with humans, [and] has a means for making effective a claim to legitimate leadership. To become a “big man” requires recruiting a large enough (and influential enough) following; and the

> best way to recruit followers is to demonstrate that one has been oneself recruited by the gods.... [The] involuntary character of the initial affliction, and its onerous character... serve to reflect and convey the crucial message that leadership has been thrust upon a resisting and unwilling individual; and therefore, that the pursuit and exercise of power does not reflect the motive of self-aggrandizement, but rather is in the service of the social whole.[13]

Although not a conversion experience, this first-hand account of a vision experienced by Nathan of Gaza, right hand man to seventeenth-century claimed messiah Sabbatai Sevi, serves as an example of a vision with similar motivating force to Paul's conversion appearance (this was written by Nathan himself in 1673, eight years after the experience he describes):

> He [God] sent me some of His holy angels and blessed spirits who revealed to me many of the mysteries of the Torah.... [The] spirit came over me, my hair stood on end and my knees shook and I beheld the merkabah [a divine sphere], and I saw visions of God all day long and all night, and I was vouchsafed true prophecy like any other prophet, as the voice spoke to me and began with the words: "Thus speaks the Lord".... Until this day I never yet had so great a vision.[14]

Gershom Scholem remarks on the motivating effects of this vision on Nathan:

> The psychological authenticity of these autobiographical accounts is as convincing as it is decisive. Here, at last, we have the simple truth, which had escaped both historians and novelists, about the awakening of Nathan's messianic prophecy. Whatever had been lodged in the depths of his conscious or unconscious mind now came to the fore [in this vision] in a tremendous emotional upheaval...[15]

James, like Paul, may not have been a follower of Jesus during Jesus' lifetime. In this case, similar psychological factors, in addition to the social dynamics and expectations of being Jesus' brother, could have caused him to have a conversion experience and vision of Jesus similar to

Paul's. It is also possible that James simply converted to Christianity and then had a vision of Jesus. A third possibility for the appearance to James will be suggested later.

Paul's Qualifier
"Last of all, as to someone untimely born..."

When Paul reports his experience of seeing Jesus at his conversion, he says, "*Last of all, as to someone untimely born*, he appeared also to me" (1 Cor 15:8). This qualifier suggests that when Paul had this experience, which was approximately three years after Jesus' death, sightings of Jesus had long since stopped. A short lived period of hallucinations is what one would expect in a movement that began with intense religious fervor and then returned to a more everyday norm.

Zeroing in on Paul's qualifier "last of all", there are at least two possibilities for Paul's intent that are compatible with the hallucination hypothesis proposed above. The first explanation is that Paul simply did not have any more hallucinations of Jesus after his conversion experience, and so he considered his conversion experience to be *the* last appearance of Jesus. The second explanation takes into account the possibility that Paul experienced one or more hallucinations of Jesus after his conversion hallucination. In this case, Paul may have simply meant that he considered himself the last to be *chosen* to receive appearances.

There is a third explanation for Paul's qualifier "last of all" which is proposed by some on the traditional side of scholarship and which results in substantial difficulty for the hallucination hypothesis proposed above. This third explanation is derived from the different way that the appearances of Jesus are portrayed in Luke-Acts (same author) and in the Book of Revelation.[16] This explanation is also dependent on the conclusion that Paul experienced one or more appearances of Jesus after his conversion. Below is a close look at this third possibility.

Since all of the appearances relevant to this third explanation occur in Luke-Acts with the exception of one in the Book of Revelation, Luke-Acts will be covered first. In Luke-Acts, all of the appearances of Jesus up to and including the one at Paul's conversion are portrayed as having *extra-mental* aspects to them, that is, there are aspects of the appearance that

occur in the normal space-time continuum that anyone present could see or hear. In contrast, those appearances of Jesus in Luke-Acts that occur *after* Paul's conversion, three of them (Acts 9:10-12; 18:9-10; 22:17-21), have no extra-mental aspects, they are all portrayed as occurring only in the mind of the recipient, but still sent by God. It is argued from this differentiation in Luke-Acts that Paul saw the same distinction, and that it is this distinction that Paul had in mind when he said his conversion encounter with Jesus was "last of all" (1 Cor 15:8). In other words, it is proposed that "last of all" meant to Paul that he thought his conversion encounter with Jesus was the last appearance of Jesus that involved real, tangible, in this world, extra-mental characteristics, and those that followed were only visions sent by God to the person's mind. If so, the hypothesis that Paul (and by extension others) had hallucinations of Jesus is significantly weakened because there seems no good reason for Paul to make such an extra-mental/non-extra-mental distinction if all of his visions were hallucinations.

However, there is a good explanation for this distinction in Luke-Acts without Paul ever making the same distinction. To explain, it is best to start with the account of Paul's conversion experience in Acts. In the Acts account of Paul's conversion experience, there are extra-mental elements of light and voice that the others with Paul see and hear, but there is no extra-mental Jesus (Acts 9:3-7; 22:6-10; 26:12-16). Despite this, there is wide agreement amongst scholars that a *visual* appearance of Jesus to Paul is nevertheless intended because Acts has Jesus say to Paul during his conversion, "Get up and stand on your feet; for I have *appeared* [*ophthen*] to you for this purpose..." (Acts 26:16; see too Acts 9:17; 9:27; 22:14 for more indications that Acts intends that Paul *visually* saw Jesus at his conversion). Because of this, many have concluded that Acts intends that Paul saw Jesus in a *non*-extra-mental way, that is, in a vision sent by God to his mind while at the same time the extra-mental elements of light and voice took place.

Given the unusual way that Paul's conversion experience is portrayed in Acts, the task for those who propose the appearance traditions originated with hallucinations is to explain two things. First, why was Paul's conversion encounter with Jesus in Acts, and the three appearances of Jesus after Paul's conversion (Acts 9:10-12; 18:9-10; 22:17-21), legendized into appearances of Jesus that occurred in the mind of the

recipient, instead of being legendized into appearances of Jesus that were just as corporeal and extra-mental as the appearances to the disciples in Luke's gospel and the other gospels (e.g. Lk 24:36-51; Mt 28:8-10; Jn 20:19-29)? Second, why in the legendization process were the extra-mental elements of light and voice added to Paul's conversion encounter with Jesus in Acts but not to the other appearances of Jesus in Acts that occurred after Paul's conversion?

Regarding the first question, by the time Luke wrote his gospel and Acts there was the tradition that after a short period of appearances, Jesus ascended up to heaven (Acts 1:1-11; Lk 24:50-51; Jn 20:17; and in the later added ending to Mark, Mk 16:19). The Jesus Seminar considers the ascension tradition a legend:

> The earliest sequence probably regarded resurrection and ascension/exaltation as a single event: Jesus was raised and taken up into heaven at the same time. The appearances of Jesus would then have been appearances from heaven....The ascension is an invention [or legend]...to bring the appearances to a close [or to explain why they came to a close].[17]

If the ascension tradition arose in order to explain why the appearances stopped after a short time in the early Christian community, the reason an extra-mental Jesus does not appear at Paul's conversion in Acts, or in the three appearances after Paul's conversion in Acts, is simply because in Acts, Jesus had already long ago ascended up to heaven. Although disagreeing that the ascension tradition is a legend, traditionalists agree that the ascension tradition is the driving force behind this distinction in the appearances in Acts. As William Craig says:

> According to Luke, the appearance to Paul was in fact different from the others because Paul's was a post-ascension encounter. That is to say, after appearing to His disciples and others for some forty days, Jesus physically left this universe or dimension. He will come again at the end of history.... Therefore, the appearance to Paul could not have been physical like the others; it had to be in some sense visionary. But it was not merely visionary, for it had real

> manifestations in the world "out there," namely, the light and the voice.[18]

So the attempt to equate a Luke-Acts extra-mental/non-extra-mental distinction in appearances with Paul's qualifier "last of all" hangs by a thread and boils down to just the second question — Why in Acts does Paul's conversion encounter with Jesus have *any* extra-mental elements (light and voice) while the other three appearances of Jesus after Paul's conversion do not? One could just chalk it up to some unknown part of the legendization process, but legitimizing Jesus' appearance to Paul through the validating witness of others seems the most obvious possibility. In sum, the extra-mental/non-extra-mental distinction in Luke-Acts is simply the result of two legendary trajectories — the ascension tradition and the legitimization of Paul's conversion — it had nothing to do with how Paul viewed his encounters with Jesus or the intent behind his qualifier "last of all".

The one appearance of Jesus after Paul's conversion that is not in Luke-Acts is in the Book of Revelation and is to John (Rev 1:9-18). However, by the time the Book of Revelation was written, the ascension tradition was well known. Therefore, for the same reasons noted above, it would not be surprising if this appearance is intended to be a vision sent by God to John's mind.

There is also another difficulty with the proposal that Paul saw an extra-mental/non-extra-mental distinction between his conversion encounter with Jesus and those after. In 2 Cor 12:1-9, Paul refers to "visions" of the Lord:

> It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to *visions* and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think

> better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Cor 12:1-9)

Most scholars think Paul is talking about himself in this passage. Additionally, because Paul refers to this person as "in Christ", many scholars think he is talking about someone who was *already* a Christian. If both points are correct, and if Paul intends that he *saw* Jesus in this "vision" of the Lord, then Paul is talking here about one of his *post-conversion* visions of Jesus. If so, notice that Paul accepts the possibility that this vision had *extra-mental* elements: "whether in the body or out of the body I do not know" (an "in the body" trip to the third heaven presumably meaning that a bystander would see that person's body being transported up into the sky). So in Paul's mind, an appearance of Jesus involving extra-mental elements was possible *after* his conversion. This is further indication that Paul did not make an extra-mental/non-extra-mental distinction between his conversion encounter with Jesus and those after.

As an aside, if Paul does not intend that Jesus was visually *seen* in the above "vision" of the Lord, it introduces the possibility that an out of body type experience without ever seeing Jesus could qualify as an "appearance" of Jesus. That the word "vision" [*optasia*], which Paul uses in 2 Cor 12:1 above, and the word "appeared" [*ophthe*], which is used for every appearance in 1 Cor 15:5-8 including Paul's *conversion* encounter with Jesus, are interchangeable is evident in an Acts passage that is referring to Paul's *conversion* appearance: "I was not disobedient to the heavenly *vision* [*optasia*]" (Acts 26:19). If an out of body type experience without ever seeing Jesus qualified as an appearance of Jesus, then some of the appearances in 1 Cor 15:5-8 could be just ecstatic experiences where the person only felt the presence of Jesus but did not actually see him.

In conclusion, it is plausible that Paul's qualifier "last of all" in 1 Cor 15:8 meant that he considered his conversion encounter with Jesus to be

the last appearance of Jesus or that he considered himself the last to be *chosen* to receive appearances.

The Appearances to Groups of People

Examples of simultaneous group hallucinations that are sometimes used to explain the Christian traditions are not comparable for several reasons. For example, the well known group sightings of the Virgin Mary appear to be associated only with children, such as those that occurred at Medjugorje (6 children/teenagers), Fatima (3 children), Garabandal (4 children), and La Salette (2 children). The sightings at Medjugorje may also have involved drug use and they often involved the seeing of just a faint light which has no resemblance to a person. Other group sightings of a dead person have been associated with only a single location where there are very unique light reflections or even dust formations, such as on a window or some other surface. Some group sightings are the result of similar afterimages appearing in the eyes of those who have stared at the sun for prolonged periods of time (Fatima, 1917; Conyers, Georgia, 1990 and later). Some group sightings are like those of Elvis, which involve groups of people seeing a person who resembles someone who is dead, but is believed by those who see him or her to have faked their death and to be living incognito. Lastly, some group sightings are fraudulent, such as the probable use of a light image projection device in Knock, Ireland (1879). In summary, if the group traditions in 1 Cor 15:5-7 are the result of people simultaneously seeing Jesus, there is no comparable example anywhere in history. In light of this, the following explanations are offered for these group appearance traditions.

The Appearances to the Twelve and to All of the Apostles

1 Cor 15:5 & 7: "... he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve...he appeared to James, then to all the apostles."

In the weeks and months after Jesus' crucifixion, what the emerging Christian community must have needed badly were people who had the ability to lead, that is, the ability to teach, preach, and defend their new

beliefs. It is therefore plausible that the traditions of the appearance to the Twelve and to all the apostles was born out of a desire to designate who had the authority to lead, not out of a desire to accurately record appearances (the origin of the group known as "the Twelve" is not the focus here; it could have been a group formed by Jesus before his death or a group formed by Peter from his closest companions after Jesus' death). This would be consistent with the hierarchical structure in the two appearance traditions above — Peter apparently being the leader of the group known as "the Twelve", James apparently being the leader of the group known as "all the apostles". We know too that an appearance of Jesus was *required* in order to confer authority to someone in the early church, for Paul says, "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Cor 9:1). If authority designation was the primary motivation for these appearance traditions, it is probable that some of these people, possibly even James, did not even experience an individual appearance by Jesus but were nevertheless still very suitable for and designated as leaders. According to Stephen Patterson:

> Both the Twelve and the church have everything to gain by the assertion that the risen Lord had also appeared to the Twelve. Including the Twelve in the appearance formulae probably derives from a decision on the part of the early church to expand the sphere of authority that was originally confined to the "pillars" [e.g. Peter and his closest confidants] to include the Twelve as well. It is not so likely that it derives from an actual experience of the risen Jesus.... [This] could also be said about the claim in 1 Cor 15:7 that Jesus also appeared to "the apostles".... [We] have in this expression a second authority-bearing designation from earliest Christianity.... The inclusion of "the apostles" in this formula... derives from an ecclesial decision to expand the sphere of authority beyond James to include others who could be trusted with the task of preaching.[19]

Patterson's conclusion is echoed by the Jesus Seminar:

> The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar were doubtful that the eleven as a group ever experienced a vision of the risen Jesus at one time.... The tradition probably arose as a confirmation of apostolic authority....

> Reports of appearances to various people in the early Christian community had political consequences. The recipient of an appearance had received the special endorsement of the source of all authority, Jesus of Nazareth, and was therefore entitled to respect and power.[20]

From our perspective 2000 years later, the emergence of such traditions for the sake of giving authority might seem like an implausibly large lie. But from the perspective of the earliest Christians, the inaccuracy was probably inconsequential given that they genuinely believed Jesus was raised from the dead, they thought he was appearing to many people, some of the Twelve and the apostles probably did see Jesus individually, many or all of the Twelve and the apostles probably shared in group ecstatic experiences where it was believed Jesus was present, and such an understanding added to the authority that the Twelve and the apostles deserved and needed. A similar well intended and from their point of view minor distortion of the truth happened in the early Mormon movement. As Mormon historian Grant Palmer says:

> On 25 March 1838, Martin Harris testified publicly that none of the signatories to the Book of Mormon saw or handled the physical records.... [Rather, Harris said he and the others saw the golden plates] in vision or imagination....His statement, made at the height of Ohio's banking-related apostasy, became the final straw that caused Apostles Luke S. Johnson, Lyman E. Johnson, and John F. Boynton, and high priest Stephen Burnett and seventy Warren Parish to exit the church.[21] [Note: Seeing things in vision or imagination was a peculiarity of that time and place, especially amongst those who divined for buried treasure, as Martin Harris, Joseph Smith, and others associated with the earliest Mormon movement did.]

Stephen Burnett, one of those present at Harris' testimony, reported on Harris' steadfast belief in the Book of Mormon despite knowing that the nature of his witness to it had been exaggerated: "he [Harris] was sorry for any man who rejected the Book of Mormon for he [still] knew it was true....[Harris lamented that] he never should have told that the testimony

of the eight was false, if it had not been picked out of him but should have let it passed as it was..."[22]

The Appearance to the 500+

1 Cor 15:6: "he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died."

There is one big problem that this tradition faces. A simultaneous appearance to over 500 people should have been one of the most, or the most, momentous appearances by Jesus, and yet it does not show up anywhere else in the literature. As Gerd Ludemann says, "[It] is improbable that such an event witnessed by more than five hundred people should otherwise have left no trace."[23]

This difficulty suggests that Paul is repeating here a fringe legend that he picked up from the lay community. If Paul's comment that some of the 500 have died was part of the tradition when he received it, he most likely received it well after he received the other traditions in 1 Cor 15:3-7. If Paul received this tradition earlier, Paul may be making a reasonable assumption when writing 1 Corinthian 15 that some had by that time died.

The tradition itself may have begun as a collective spiritual experience in the early Christian community that was interpreted by some as an appearance and/or later grew into an appearance (with the number 500+ probably also growing at the same time). As Stephen Patterson says, "It is not inconceivable that an early Christian group might have interpreted an ecstatic worship experience as an appearance of the risen Jesus, however loosely this might be understood."[24]

If Paul picked up this tradition from the fringes of the lay community, he probably knew it was questionable when he passed it on to the Corinthians. In considering Paul's decision to use it anyway, consider these comments by Catholic scholar Raymond Brown about a different New Testament appearance tradition that he accepts as fictitious:

> ... there is neither internal nor external evidence to cause us to affirm historicity. The same may be said of the raising of the holy ones and their appearance to many in Jerusalem (Matt 27:52-53).... Truth

> conveyed by drama can at times be more effectively impressed on people's minds than truth conveyed by history.[25]

Paul may be doing the same thing. He may be more interested in leading a wayward congregation to believe what he genuinely feels is the truth about Jesus than in reporting accurate history. Supporting this are other instances where Paul appears to stretch the truth. For example, Paul says he prays "continually" (1 Thess 5:17). He says that his gospel is being proclaimed in "all" of the world (Romans 1:8; Col 1:23). He wishes opponents would "mutilate" themselves (Gal 5:12). That Paul is trying a little too hard with this appearance tradition is also suggested in his comment that most of the 500 "are still alive, though some have died", as if any of the Corinthians were really going to pack up and travel over 1000 miles to Palestine to check out any of his witnesses. The stubborn absence of this tradition from the rest of the Christian Origins literature also leaves open the possibility that Paul the persuader is the one who has turned an early collective spiritual experience into an appearance.

It is unknown if other church leaders visited the Corinthians after Paul passed this tradition on to them. However, if they did, and if the Corinthians questioned them about it, the other church leaders may only have been able to respond that they did not know anything about it. But even if they knew this was a fringe legend, instead of telling this to a group that was notoriously skeptical of the resurrection, they may have just let it pass as a minor issue amongst more serious issues that existed between them and Paul. It is also possible that they corrected Paul's report and the legend died right there, which would explain why it does not show up anywhere else.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is plausible that the appearance traditions in 1 Cor 15:5-8 are a mix of hallucinations, collective ecstatic experiences, designations of authority, and legendary growth.

Chapter 5

Raised On the Third Day

1 Cor 15:4: "... he was raised *on the third day* in accordance with the scriptures..."

This is the last part of 1 Cor 15:3-7 that needs to be explained. According to the Jesus Seminar, the gospel accounts of Jesus predicting his resurrection on the third day after his death were put on his lips after his death as a form of legendary embellishment that Jesus knew all along exactly what was going to happen.[1] If true, and if there was no discovered empty tomb on the third day after Jesus' death, what then caused the third-day belief?

Some have proposed that the first vision of Jesus was on the third day after his death. However, this has the significant difficulty that the earliest tradition of Jesus' first appearance places it *later* than the third day, in Galilee (Mk 14:28; 16:7). Noting the creed's reference to "scriptures", many have proposed that instead of some *event* causing the third-day belief, the third-day belief originates from early Christian interaction with their Jewish scriptures. The most popular scriptural theories propose that the third-day belief originates from Hos 6:2 or a Jewish sacred third-day tradition. Although both of these theories would fit well with the rest of this reconstruction, I think there is a more plausible answer. Because we are dealing with degrees of plausibility here, I will first outline for later comparison purposes the difficulties with the Hos 6:2 and Jewish sacred third-day theories. After that, I will present what I think is a more likely scriptural origin to the third-day belief.

The Difficulties with the Hos 6:2 and Sacred Third-day Theories

There are two difficulties with the idea that the third-day belief comes from Christian interaction with Hos 6:2: “After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him”. First, for Hos 6:2’s phrase “on the third day” to have given birth to the third-day belief, there had to have been some other attraction to Hos 6:2 because the phrase “on the third day” would not itself have been attractive with the third-day belief not yet born. Before the third-day belief was born, Hos 6:2 would have in effect looked like this to Jesus’ followers: “he will revive us;... he will raise us up, that we may live before him.” Although Hos 6:2 lends itself well to the idea of resurrection, it has an unavoidable group/nation focus (“revive *us*”, “raise *us*”) and therefore does not look like an attractive scriptural reference for those looking for scriptural confirmation of a raised *messiah* (singular person). As William Craig points out, “[It] is very unlikely that the disciples should land upon Hos 6.2 and apply it to Jesus’ resurrection.”[2] The second difficulty with Hos 6:2 is that it is absent from the Christian literature until the beginning of the third century (Tertullian, Adversus Judaeos 13:23), and there is no claim anywhere of its earlier Christian use. The eventual Christian use of Hos 6:2 despite its group/nation focus looks more like a product of the continuing Christian process of laying claim to as much Old Testament scripture as possible rather than because Hos 6:2 was the origin of the third-day belief.

The sacred third-day theory proposes that the third-day belief originates from approximately two dozen third-day related passages in the Old Testament and/or a Jewish sacred third-day tradition that was by the first century formed from those passages, such a tradition being attested to in third-century and later Jewish literature.[3] There are three difficulties with this theory.

First, if the influence of so many OT third-day scriptures or a formed sacred third-day tradition was strong enough to cause Christians to simply *assume* its application to Jesus’ resurrection, it is odd that there is hardly any interest in the third day’s *scriptural* significance outside of the 1 Cor 15:4 creed. In the entire New Testament, there is only one other general reference to the scriptural aspect of the third day (Lk 18:31-33), and only one specific OT scripture cited (Jon 1:17 in Mt 12:40). Hos 6:2, probably the single most relevant scripture in the third-century attested Jewish sacred third-day tradition, does not appear in the Christian literature until

the beginning of the third century (as already mentioned above). Another critical component of the third-century attested Jewish sacred third-day tradition, the third-day aspect of the near sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:4), is also not mentioned in the Christian literature, even at those points in the Christian literature that are speaking about Isaac (Rom 8:32; Heb 11:17-19; Jas 2:21-23). As William Craig points out, "The appeal to the offering of Isaac as evidence that the New Testament knows of the rabbinic exegesis concerning the theological significance of the third day is counter-productive."[4] In sum, the first difficulty with the sacred third-day theory is that the New Testament's *level of interest* in the scriptural aspect of the third day does not match an origin where the third day had been elevated to a sacred or near sacred level. A scriptural solution that makes sense of the third day's inclusion in a creed of core beliefs (1 Cor 15:3-4) but the lack of scriptural interest elsewhere in the Christian literature would be more persuasive.

The second difficulty with the sacred third-day theory is similar to the first. If the influence of so many OT third-day scriptures or a formed sacred third-day tradition was strong enough to cause Christians to simply assume its application to Jesus' resurrection, it is odd that similar assumed applications of the third-day theme do not appear in *Jewish* literature before the third century. This gives the impression that an elevated third-day tradition did not exist in Jewish thought until the third century. As William Craig notes:

> Lehmann believes that these citations [from third-century Jewish literature] embody traditions that go back orally prior to the Christian era. But if that is the case then should not we expect to confront these motifs in Jewish literature contemporaneous with the New Testament times, namely, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha? One would especially expect to confront the third day motif in the apocalyptic works. In fact, it is conspicuously absent. The book of I Enoch, which is quoted in Jude, had more influence on the New Testament writers than any other apocryphal or pseudepigraphic work and is a valuable source of information concerning Judaism from 200 BC to AD 100. In this work the eschatological resurrection is associated with the number seven, not three (91. 15-16; 93). Similarly in 4 Ezra, a first century compilation, the eschatological resurrection takes place after

> seven days (7. 26-44). A related work from the second half of the first century and a good representative of Jewish thought contemporaneous with the New Testament, 2 Baruch gives no indication of the day of the resurrection at history's end (50-5 1). Neither does 2 Macc 7. 9- 42; 12. 43-45 or the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs (Judah) 25. 1, 4; (Zebulun) 10. 2; (Benjamin) 10. 6-18. All these works, which stem from intertestamental or New Testament times, have a doctrine of eschatological resurrection, but not one of them knows of the third day motif. Evidently the number seven was thought to have greater divine import than the number three (cf. Rev 1. 20; 6. 1; 8. 2; 15. 1, 7). In 2 Macc 5. 14; 11. 18 we find 'three days' and 'third day' mentioned in another context, but their meaning is wholly non-theological, indicating only 'a short time' or 'the day after tomorrow'. Lehmann's case would be on firmer ground if he were able to find passages in Jewish literature contemporary with the New Testament which employ the third day motif or associate the resurrection with the third day. It appears that this interpretation is a peculiarity of later rabbinical exegesis of the Talmudic period.[5]

Some may point to events in the OT that happened on the third day as evidence of an elevated third day in Jewish thought well before and in the first century. However, on closer analysis, there does not seem to be any favoritism toward the third day in the OT. The results of a simple phrase search in the OT yields the following number of hits for each phrase: "First Day" (64), "Second Day" (32), "Third Day" (13), "Fourth Day" (14), "Fifth Day" (16), "Sixth Day" (10), "Seventh Day" (66), "Eighth Day" (20), "Ninth Day" (12), "Tenth Day" (20). If anything, the first day or seventh day (at five times the frequency) should have been the sacred day that the Christians adopted. For those who suggest the third day passages in the OT involved events that were more significant than those of other days, a few "first day" passages serve to show that this is not the case. God created light and dark on the first day (Gen 1:5). After Noah's flood, it was on the first day of the month that the mountain tops were seen (Gen 8:5). On the first day of Passover, hold a sacred assembly (Ex 12:16; Lev 23:7, 35; Num 28:18). On the first day of the month, Moses proclaimed to the Israelites all that the Lord had commanded him (Deut

1:3). It was on the first day that Daniel set his mind to humble himself before God that God listened to him and answered him (Dan 10:12). Why didn't the Christians assume that Jesus was raised on the first day in accordance with the scriptures instead of on the third day?

The third problem with the sacred third-day theory is that it requires the "when" of Jesus' resurrection to have been so important to the earliest Christians that they simply *assumed* a sacred-day tradition applied to Jesus' resurrection. But such an emphasis on *when* Jesus resurrected seems unwarranted; why not just leave that minor detail unanswered? A solution in which the Christians were unintentionally led to the third-day belief, instead of just assuming it, would be more persuasive.

Introduction to the Ps 16:10 Theory

With the difficulties of the above two theories noted for later comparison, it will now be argued that the third-day belief more likely comes from early Christian interaction with the Greek or Aramaic form of Ps 16:10: "For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience *diaphthora.*" In Aramaic, the last key word is *byt shwt*. Both the Greek and Aramaic forms of this passage will be discussed in detail later.

A Ps 16:10 derived third-day belief has been briefly considered before but dismissed for reasons that are not very persuasive. Douglas Hill considered it a live possibility in 1967 except for its incompatibility with his view that the early resurrection belief was only "spiritual" in nature.[6] This incompatibility is not a problem here since it is accepted that the earliest resurrection belief was *bodily* in nature. Hill appears to be the last to consider Ps 16:10 as he is simply footnoted by Gordon Fee in 1987 and again by Anthony Thiselton in 2000.[7] Before Hill, Bruce Metzger in 1957 also briefly considered Ps 16:10 as a possible origin to the third-day belief. He affirmed a bodily resurrection belief and an implicit three-day timeline in Ps 16:10. However, his difficulty was with the transition from Ps 16:10's *by* the third day timeline (to be discussed later) to the *on* the third day timeline that appears in the early creed.[8] I will attempt to show that this is not so big of a hurdle.

Before continuing, it is worth noting that this chapter is by far the most drawn out and detailed in the book. Because of this, some may wish to skip to the conclusion of this chapter where there is a very succinct summary of the Ps 16:10 theory, and then decide whether to read through every detail.

The Nature of the Earliest Third-Day Belief: Literal or Symbolic?

Before presenting the Ps 16:10 theory, it is important to note that it is dependent on the conclusion that the third-day belief was understood by the earliest Christians in *literal* chronological terms, that is, Jesus' followers believed he was raised *on the third day* in the plainly understood sense. All of traditional scholarship and some of non-traditional scholarship agrees with this. However, some think this unlikely in light of the following expressions of resurrection timeline in the later Christian literature.

Mark, Matthew, and Luke narrate the crucifixion of Jesus to have been on Friday afternoon with a Sunday morning discovered empty tomb, a timeline of resurrection that is *on* the third day (Jews measured days from sunset to sunset and counted any part of a day as one day[9]). Also consistent with an *on* the third day timeline are Matthew's and Luke's phrases "*on* the third day", and "*the* third day" (Mt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 27:64; Lk 9:22; 18:33; 24:7, Acts 10:40). But a fourth-day resurrection is suggested in Mark's and Matthew's use of the phrase "after three days" (Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:34; Mt 27:63). A fourth-day resurrection is also suggested in the "three nights" of Jon 1:17 which Matthew cites as a scriptural sign of Jesus' resurrection: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth" (Mt 12:40). A fourth day resurrection is again suggested in the Gospel of John and the non-canonical Gospel of Peter. In each, the resurrection remains on Sunday but instead of having the crucifixion *after* the Passover Seder meal as in the synoptics (Mk 14:12; Mt 26:17-19; Lk 22:7), they have Jesus crucified *before* the Passover Seder meal (Jn 18:28; 19:14; GPeter 2:5), suggesting a Thursday crucifixion. This same fourth-day timeline may

also be suggested by Paul: “For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor 5:7; the paschal lamb being sacrificed in the afternoon *before* the Passover Seder meal). Further adding to the confusion, the guards in the Gospel of Peter, who witness the supposed fourth-day resurrection in that gospel, were only supposed to guard the tomb “for three days” (GPeter 8:3). To finish off, there is the ambiguous phrase “in three days” in several gospels, which could be taken as referring to a third-day or fourth-day chronology (Mk 14:58; 15:29; Mt 26:61; 27:40; Jn 2:19, 20).

One could conclude from the different expressions of chronology above that both a literal third-day and a literal fourth-day tradition existed, with the literal third-day tradition reflected in 1 Cor 15:4. But one could also conclude from these expressions that their authors (or later scribes) were not concerned with precise chronology because they did not think of the third day literally. This in turn can suggest that the third-day belief was *never* intended literally.[10]

However, a consistent *on* the third day timeline in all of the literary evidence above is not as far fetched as some might think. There are three difficulties that must be overcome in order to conclude a consistent *on* the third day timeline in all of the Christian literature — John’s and GPeter’s (and possibly Paul’s) placement of the crucifixion before instead of after the Passover Seder, Mark’s and Matthew’s use of the phrase “after three days”, and Matthew’s use of Jon 1:17. These will be covered in order.

Because the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Peter place Jesus’ crucifixion before the Passover Seder meal instead of after the Passover Seder meal (as in the synoptics), one can easily conclude that John and Peter intend that the crucifixion occurred on Thursday with a fourth day resurrection on Sunday, and the synoptics intend that the crucifixion occurred on Friday with a third day resurrection on Sunday. However, there is another obvious possibility that is easily missed. Instead of the day of the week (e.g. Monday through Friday) that the crucifixion occurred on being moved by one day in one of these traditions, *the day of the week that the Passover meal occurred on* may have been moved by one day in one of these traditions (the day of the week that the Passover meal falls on varies year to year based on when the new moon is spotted). This is argued powerfully by John A.T. Robinson and Raymond E. Brown who conclude that John and GPeter (and Paul) preserve the historically correct

tradition of a Friday night Passover meal, and the Synoptists or their tradition have simply moved the Passover meal to Thursday night.[11] If correct, every Christian narrative has a consistent Friday afternoon crucifixion with a Sunday morning discovered empty tomb, a timeline of resurrection that is *on* the third day. Note too that this now makes sense of the Gospel of Peter's guarding of the tomb "for three days" (GPeter 8:1-3).

It is worth noting here that some see a Thursday crucifixion with a fourth day resurrection on Sunday morning in Matthew's use of the plural *sabbatwn* in Mt 28:1: "After the *sabbatwn*, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb." James Tabor translates *sabbatwn* here as "After the *Sabbaths*" and concludes that Matthew is trying to convey that Jesus was crucified on Thursday and resurrected after the Passover Sabbath on Friday and the normal Sabbath on Saturday.[12] However, both Strong's and the Arndt & Gingrich (1957) Greek-English Lexicon indicate that *sabbatwn* can mean simply "week". In this case Mt 28:1 reads "After the week" which of course is "After the Sabbath" since the Sabbath is the last day of the week, which is exactly how it is translated in the NRSV Bible. In fact, Matthew uses *sabbatwn* in exactly the same way in the next part of the same verse: "as the first day of the week [*sabbatwn*] was dawning". Translating this as "Sabbaths" instead of as "week" does not make any sense. Other uses of *sabbatwn* also suggest that "week" is the correct translation in Mt 28:1 (see Mk 16:2; Lk 24:1; Jn 20:1, 19; Acts 20:7). If correct, then Matthew intends that the tomb was discovered empty after only one Sabbath, not two, and therefore *on* the third day.

Regarding Mark's and Matthew's phrase "after three days", this phrase could mean *on* the third day in light of Jewish inclusive time reckoning. Since *any part* of a day was counted as a day, and days were counted from sunset to sunset, a Friday afternoon death with a resurrection, say, 3 hours after sunset on Saturday, would still be "after" three days. Day one would be from Friday afternoon to Friday sunset. Day two would be from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. Day three would be from Saturday sunset to 3 hours after Saturday sunset. We see this use of inclusive time reckoning in the OT, where being put in prison "for three days" was the same as being released *on* the third day (Gen 42:17, 18-25).[13] Although it would be circular to use an example from the gospels to make this same point, the close proximity and apparent interest in temporal time of two phrases

there may nevertheless prove to be another good example. In Matthew, the prediction that Jesus would rise "after three days" (Mt 27:63) is equated with the need to guard the tomb "*until* the third day" (Mt 27:64). But if "after three days" meant after the very end of the third day, they would need to guard the tomb until the *fourth* day.

This leads us to Matthew's use of Jon 1:17: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth" (Mt 12:40). Although there is no way a literal "three nights" can fit into the *on* the third day chronology suggested above, it is curious that this most difficult to reconcile of the chronologies is also the only instance of the three-day chronology appearing in a scriptural reference. Because of this, there are four reasons to conclude that Matthew is here using Jon 1:17 as an *imprecise* scriptural allusion for an *on* the third day timeline.

Significant parts of this first reason have already been discussed in Chapter One and have been alluded to in the discussion above about Mark's and Matthew's use of the phrase "after three days". They will be repeated here for clarity. There is a trend in the gospels that Jesus' future resurrection is never *publicly* revealed during his ministry (he only reveals it in private to his disciples). The one exception to this is Matthew's Jon 1:17 sign, and it is aimed directly at the "scribes and Pharisees" (Mt 12:38). Note too that Matthew is also the only gospel to post guards at the tomb, regarded by many scholars as an apologetic response to the charge of a stolen body (of course the Gospel of Peter too has the tomb guarded, but since we are missing much of that gospel, it is impossible to know if it also publicly revealed Jesus' future resurrection like Matthew's gospel did; therefore, GPeter is left out of this comparison). Matthew posts the guards in his story by having the chief priests and Pharisees ask Pilate to guard the tomb:

> ... the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember *what that impostor said* while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead', and the last deception would be worse than the first." (Mt 27:62-64)

How did the chief priests and Pharisees in Matthew's account know that the tomb needed guarding? It appears as if they got the idea from the Jon 1:17 announcement. As C.H. Giblin says:

> In [Mt] 27.63, when the Pharisees recall what Jesus said while he was still living, they must be referring principally to what was told them in [Mt] 12.40. For [Mt] 12.40 is the only place where a burial-prediction, able to be construed as a resurrection-prediction was made to them or even stated publicly.[14]

If Matthew intends that the Jon 1:17 announcement was where the Jewish authorities got the idea that they needed to guard the tomb, look at how long they say it should be guarded — "*until* the third day" (Mt 27:64). This gives the impression that Jon 1:17 is being *interpreted* in Matthew's gospel as referring to resurrection *on* the third day.

The second reason to conclude that Matthew is using Jon 1:17 as an imprecise scriptural allusion for an on the third day timeline is that it is doubtful that Matthew intended his Jon 1:17 sign to be taken in isolation from the rest of his gospel. He may have considered it obvious to his audience that he was using Jon 1:17 in an imprecise way to refer to the *on* the third day chronology expressed in the rest of his gospel, especially the narrated Friday afternoon crucifixion and Sunday morning resurrection.

Third, an imprecise use of scripture would not be out of character for Matthew compared to his other inexact uses of OT scripture. For example, Matthew uses Isa 7:14 in Mt 1:22-23 to refer to a virgin *conception* for someone in *his century*, as opposed to a virgin who *eight centuries earlier* married and then conceived *normally*.

Lastly, given the scriptural choices available to him, Jon 1:17 may have been the best Matthew could do for a messiah raised on the third day. This is not as far fetched as some might think when one looks for alternative scriptures Matthew could have used or looks closely at what might appear to be the most obvious alternative, Hos 6:2 ("After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him"). If Hos 6:2 was not the *cause* of the third-day belief, it would not have had any advantage over Jon 1:17 in terms of familiarity to Matthew or his audience. With this in mind, put yourself in Mathew's

shoes (or the shoes of the legendary process that created the Jon 1:17 prediction) and consider Hos 6:2 and Jon 1:17 side by side. Although Hos 6:2 has a perfect "on the third day" timeline, and it lends itself very well to resurrection, its previously mentioned group/nation focus does not lend itself very well to the singular person focus of a messiah. In contrast, Jon 1:17 — "Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights" — although it has an imperfect third-day expression, it has a good *singular person* focus, and its captivity/release from the sea creature easily lends itself as an analogy to captivity/release from the earth, i.e. resurrection (which Matthew capitalizes on). It is impossible to get into Matthew's mind, and it would be inappropriate to call Jon 1:17 a "good" scriptural sign of a messiah raised on the third day, but the fact is that Hos 6:2, due to its difficult connection to a single person, does not look any better. If Matthew had an *on* the third day timeline in mind, his choice of Jon 1:17 over Hos 6:2 is not so unusual. (Why Matthew would choose Jon 1:17 over Ps 16:10 will be addressed later.)

A final thing that counts against a symbolic third day intended in the Christian literature is that virtually all of the expressions of Jesus' resurrection chronology refer to a specific number of days. There are almost no phrases speaking of a short or vague period of time, and there does not seem to have been a shortage of such expressions nor a hesitancy to use them in other places, as the following examples show. "A *little later* someone else said..." (Lk 22:58). "For a *short time*, we were made orphans" (1 Th 2:17). "I will be with you a *little while* longer" (Jn 7:33). "The God of peace will *shortly* crush Satan" (Rom 16:20). "I will come to you *soon*, if the Lord wills" (1 Cor 4:19). Other examples can be found in Mt 26:73; Jn 12:35; 13:33; 14:19; Acts 18:23; 25:4; Phil 2:19, 24; 1 Ti 3:14; 2 Ti 4:9; Hbr 10:37; 13:23; 2 Pe 1:14; 3 Jo 1:14; Rev 1:1; 22:6. There is only one instance where a short period of time expression is used to refer to Jesus' resurrection (assuming it is not instead referring to Jesus' second coming): "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a *little while*, and you will see me" (repeated three times in Jn 16:16-19).

As Edward Bode concludes, "Several variant phrasings are used to express the third-day motif, but nothing demands that these expressions should not be understood as equivalent."[15] If correct, then one cannot claim inconsistency of resurrection chronology in the Christian literature as an indicator that the third-day belief was not understood literally.

Furthermore, even if there were some non-literal understandings of the third-day, or even the existence of a literal fourth-day tradition, it is still entirely plausible that the earliest Christian tradition in 1 Cor 15:4 was that Jesus was raised on a *literal* third day.

Plausibly Positing the Christian Use of Ps 16:10 in the Early 30's C.E.

Before showing how the third-day belief was derived from Ps 16:10, it is first necessary to show that it is plausible that the very earliest Christians were interacting with Ps 16:10. Like the third-century attested Christian use of Hos 6:2 and the third-century attested Jewish sacred third-day tradition, the Christian use of Ps 16:10 is faced with the significant difficulty of late attestation, in this case Acts (2:27; 13:35). It is worth noting however that Acts is an earlier attestation by a significant margin, dated anywhere from 60 to 125 C.E. It is worth noting too that Acts specifically claims Ps 16:10 was used by the earliest Christians as a raised messiah prophecy almost immediately after Jesus' crucifixion (Acts 2:1-27 has Peter citing Ps 16:10 at Pentecost). Although an unreliable claim, it is more than can be said of Hos 6:2 or the sacred third-day tradition, neither of which are claimed anywhere to have been in Christian use earlier than the third century. Suppose for the moment that Ps 16:10 was used by the earliest Christians. Below is an attempt to identify why Ps 16:10 does not appear in the Synoptic gospels or the Pauline epistles, even though those authors may have known of its Christian use.

Tracking the use of Ps 110:1 in the synoptic gospels is useful for shedding light on why Ps 16:10 is not used in the synoptic gospels. Ps 110:1 is useful for this because it is located right next to Ps 16:10 in Acts and it too is used in Acts as a resurrection prophecy (and an exaltation prophecy). From Acts (with Ps 110:1 in italics):

> This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "*The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'*" Therefore let the entire

> house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified. (Acts 2:32-36)

In stark contrast to Ps 16:10, which does not appear in any of the gospels, Ps 110:1 appears in Mark (12:35-37), Matthew (22:41-45), and Luke (20:41-44). And yet at that point where each gospel uses Ps 110:1, its resurrection aspect is *not* highlighted:

> [Jesus is publicly speaking in this scene:] How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, by the Holy Spirit, declared, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.'" David himself calls him Lord; so how can he be his son? (Mk 12:35-37; Mark being representative of Matthew and Luke)

Whatever the reason the synoptics do not highlight the resurrection aspect of Ps 110:1, that could be the same reason Ps 16:10 is not mentioned at all. The reason is probably connected to the previously pointed out trend that Jesus' future resurrection is never publicly revealed (with the exception of Matthew's use of Jon 1:17 to post guards at the tomb).

The use of Ps 110:1 can also be tracked and compared to the use of Ps 16:10 in the Pauline epistles. There, Ps 110:1 is used only once, in 1 Cor 15:23-28. But instead of using Ps 110:1 to speak of Jesus' resurrection, Paul only uses it to speak of events that will occur when Jesus *returns* — he will put all of his enemies, including death, "under his feet" (this phrase presumably coming from Ps 110:1), at which time the general resurrection will occur. For whatever reason Paul refers to Ps 110:1 only once in all of his epistles, and for whatever reason Paul does not highlight Jesus' resurrection when he does refer to Ps 110:1, that could be the same reason Paul does not mention Ps 16:10 in any of his epistles.

Trying to get into Paul's head, note in 1 Corinthian 15, the only place in all of his epistles where Paul defends Jesus' resurrection, that he cites the primitive creed which itself asserts that Jesus was raised "in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:4). It is hard to believe that Paul would not have included a specific scriptural citation for Jesus' resurrection in 1 Corinthian 15 if he had wanted to given his expertise at citing scripture and that he cites specific scripture on other topics

throughout 1 Corinthians (1:19, 31; 2:9, 16; 3:19, 20; 6:16; 9:9; 10:7, 26; 14:21; 15:27, 32, 54, 55). It may therefore be the case that Paul's recitation of the widely known creed (1 Cor 15:4) fulfilled any inclination he had to support Jesus' resurrection with scriptural authority. This would explain Paul's silence on the resurrection aspect of Ps 110:1 and on Ps 16:10 even if he had known of Ps 16:10's Christian use.

If the above analysis cracks the door open slightly to a possible very early Christian use of Ps 16:10 despite its late attestation, there is one other thing that might open the door all the way. After the belief was born that Jesus was bodily raised, if there was an urge to confirm or reinforce this core belief in scriptures, then those who searched the Jewish scriptures, either by reading or remembering, would naturally have been attracted to those scriptures that most specifically and powerfully supported their raised messiah belief. In fact, it would be incredible if there was not an immediate and powerful urge to confirm such a belief in scripture. As I hope to show in detail in the next section, Ps 16:10 is a *very* attractive scripture to support such a belief. Modern Christians agree, Ps 16:10 is always at or near the top of any list of resurrected messiah prophecies. And we know of course that Luke found it attractive when he wrote Acts. As will be shown in the next section, the power of Ps 16:10 lies in the ease with which its poetic language lends itself to a resurrection interpretation, its focus on a single person, and its (believed) King David authorship which has the obvious available connection to his descendant messiah for those with the desire to make such a connection. If the earliest Christians were looking for a bodily raised messiah in their scriptures, and if I can show in the next section that Ps 16:10 lends itself very well to a bodily raised messiah interpretation, then all the earliest Christians had to do was find Ps 16:10 or remember it and they most certainly would have used it. In this case, Acts 2 may preserve an authentic memory of very early Christian use of Ps 16:10, even if Peter's speech there was embellished or otherwise invented.

Ps 16:10 as a Raised Messiah Prophecy

Below is Ps 16:10 in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, with the last key word in each language emphasized. Following the different versions of Ps 16:10 is the Christian interpretation of Ps 16:10 from Acts.

Hebrew: “For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the *Pit* [*tjv*].”

Greek: “For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience *corruption* [*diaphthora*].”[16]

Aramaic: “For you do not abandon my soul to Sheol, or hand over your righteous one to see the *house of the Pit* [*byt shwt*].”[17]

Acts, written in Greek and using the Greek form of Ps 16:10 above, interprets Ps 16:10 this way (Ps 16:10 and then its interpretation are in italics):

> David says... *“For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One experience corruption”*.... Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying, *“He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption.”* (Acts 2:25-31)

Traditionalists think Ps 16:10 is a genuine prophecy of Jesus’ resurrection. However, it will be shown below that the language of Ps 16:10 can be totally accounted for in terms of the original psalmist’s expectations for himself. After that, and despite the original intentions of Ps 16:10, it will be shown why its language so easily lends itself to a raised messiah interpretation. After these things are established, then we can look at Ps 16:10’s connection to the third-day belief.

The first indication that the psalmist is referring to himself in Ps 16:10 is that he refers to himself over 20 times in Ps 16:1-9 and then clearly refers to himself again in the first part of verse 10:

> Protect *me*, O God, for in you *I* take refuge. *I* say to the LORD, ‘You are *my* Lord; *I* have no good apart from you.’ As for the holy ones in

> the land, they are the noble, in whom is all *my* delight. Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink-offerings of blood *I* will not pour out or take their names upon *my* lips. The LORD is *my* chosen portion and *my* cup; you hold *my* lot. The boundary lines have fallen for *me* in pleasant places; *I* have a goodly heritage. *I* bless the LORD who gives *me* counsel; in the night also *my* heart instructs *me*. *I* keep the LORD always before *me*; because he is at *my* right hand, *I* shall not be moved. Therefore *my* heart is glad, and *my* soul rejoices; *my* body also rests secure. For you do not give ME up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit. (Ps 16:1-10)

In the second half of Ps 16:10 (Ps 16:10b), "faithful one" (or "Holy One" or "righteous one") not only would have been a normal title for a psalmist who thought highly of himself, but its linguistic parallel with the self reference in 16:10a indicates that the two are the same person. Making it impossible even on theological grounds to separate the elevated title in 16:10b from the self reference in 16:10a is that the above Christian interpretation in Acts interprets *both* to refer to the same person. Therefore, there is a message in Ps 16:10 that the psalmist is directing squarely at himself. What was that message?

There is often controversy about the meaning of the last word in Ps 16:10, which in Hebrew is *tjv*, translated in the LXX (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) as *diaphthora*, which in turn is usually translated into English as "corruption" (or even "decay"). The controversy centers on whether "corruption" (or "decay") is a correct translation of *diaphthora*, and whether it is in any way representative of the original Hebrew. Adding to the problem, yet another translation of the word *diaphthora* is offered by some scholars. According to Richard Carrier:

> Psalms 16:10 says the holy one will not enter the realm of the dead.... [The] word often translated as "decay" or "corruption" is not the word that actually means those things (*phthora*) but *diaphthora*, which means thorough *destruction*.... Psalms 16:10 plainly speaks of the holy one *not dying* (and not ceasing to exist).[18]

However, no matter what the originally intended meaning of this key word in Hebrew or Greek (or Aramaic), the full range of meanings can be

totally accounted for as applying to the psalmist himself. The psalmist is simply making a poetic expression of confidence that he will avoid death, either temporarily in some present difficult situation, or as the late Mitchell Dahood concluded (based on an analysis of Ugaritic and cognate literature), forever: "The psalmist firmly believes that he will be granted the same privilege accorded Enoch and Elijah; he is convinced that God will assume him to himself, without [ever] suffering the pains of death."[19]

Some have objected to Dahood's conclusion on the basis of Ps 39:13: "[O Lord] turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more." Since this psalm expresses resignation to death, it is reasoned that the hope of bodily assumption could not possibly have been intended in Ps 16:10.[20] However, not only does this assume the same author for both psalms, which may be incorrect, but it also assumes that a single person's fears, doubts, and ideas about death never change, an assumption in conflict with human nature.

The psalmist's expectation to avoid death, whether temporarily or permanently, is consistent with the last key word in Ps 16:10 meaning anything from the physical "Pit" that one is buried in, to Richard Carrier's "destruction" of personhood, to the NRSV's "corruption" translation, or even a "decay" translation. The last two possibilities are especially consistent with Dahood's analysis.

Further indicating that Ps 16:10 is simply a poetic expression of confidence by the psalmist to avoid death is the existence of virtually identical poetic language in reference to death in Ps 30:2-3 by someone who was very sick and apparently resuscitated from the edge of death: "O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit." What this psalmist was rescued from, the psalmist of Ps 16:10 wants to avoid.

Even though the language of Ps 16:10 can be totally accounted for in terms of the psalmist's expectations to avoid death, its language very easily lends itself to be reinterpreted in favor of a raised messiah. The genealogical connection to the believed author of Ps 16:10, King David, would have made it easy to conclude that Ps 16:10 was speaking in code about David's descendant messiah.

Regarding the interpretation of resurrection, consider that key word *diaphthora* in the LXX first. In light of the fact that Jesus indisputably

experienced death, it would hardly have been a leap of the interpretive imagination for those looking for a bodily raised messiah to conclude from even the most neutral translation of this word — "destruction" — that Ps 16:10 was speaking of *flesh* that did not experience "destruction". A third-century midrash on Ps 16:10 shows the same interpretive possibility about the flesh being extracted *even from the Hebrew*: "... this verse [Ps 16:10] proves that neither corruption nor worms had the power over David's flesh.... In the grave his flesh will not dissolve like the dust."[21] Given that the LXX, as in almost any translation, is "a witness to the process of transmitting tradition,"[22] and given the above Hebrew midrash on Ps 16:10, it is reasonable to conclude that the same interpretation about decay of the flesh could be extracted from the LXX or an Aramaic form of Ps 16:10 if that is all Jesus' earliest followers spoke.

But let's go deeper into this interpretation. Unlike the midrash above, the earliest Christians were looking for a *raised* messiah, not a *preserved* messiah. In this case, they would have taken Ps 16:10b as referring to Jesus being bodily raised by God *before* his flesh *could* decay. Resurrection as an act of *rescue before decay* is implicit in the Christian use of Ps 16:10 that shows up in Acts 13:34-37:

> As to *raising* him from the dead... [David said,] "You will not let your Holy One experience corruption." For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, died, was laid beside his ancestors, and experienced corruption; but he whom God raised up experienced no corruption.

For clarification, note here that the author of Acts is not using Ps 16:10 to say that Jesus' body was incapable of or was protected from decay; he is using Ps 16:10 to say that Jesus was *raised*. The *only* way to get resurrection out of Ps 16:10 is *rescue before decay.*

Some might consider the absence of an explicit third-day reference in the above Acts passage (and in Acts 2) as an indicator that the third-day belief did not come from Ps 16:10. However, Luke, and the earliest Christians who thought of Ps 16:10 as a raised messiah prophecy, *must* have had some *raised before decay time period* in mind. Luke of course believes there was a discovered empty tomb on the third day after Jesus' death (Lk 24:1-3) and that Jesus predicted he would rise on the third day

(Lk 9:22; 18:33; 24:7; Acts 10:40) and so he simply views the third day as *fitting within* Ps 16:10's before decay time period. But what Luke thinks is the origin of the third-day belief is not the question here. If the discovered empty tomb and Jesus' predictions are legends, and the third-day belief originated in scripture before that, the question is: Did that scriptural origin produce a third-day belief that fit within Ps 16:10's before decay window, or did Ps 16:10's before decay window produce the third-day belief? This treatise hopes to show it is the latter.

If the earliest Christians interpreted Ps 16:10b as referring to a raised messiah, how did they interpret Ps 16:10a: "For you will not abandon my soul to Hades [or Sheol]"? The language used in this verse can be understood in one of two ways, both of which can be interpreted in favor of resurrection. According to Greg Herrick, one way to understand the intent behind this verse is that the soul was not *left in* Hades.[23] The second way to understand the intent behind this verse is that the soul did not *go to* Hades (this is the sense of the NRSV translation). It is obvious how the first can be interpreted in favor of resurrection. How the second can be interpreted in favor of resurrection will be more clearly outlined in the next section.

In summary, if the earliest Christians were looking for a raised messiah in their scriptures, and they found or remembered Ps 16:10, it would not be surprising if they interpreted Ps 16:10 as Acts says they did. If Jesus' followers believed he was raised *before* his flesh could decay, then their Jewish beliefs about the *time* it normally took for flesh to decay would have interacted with that belief.

Ps 16:10's Three-Day Time Limit

Below are second-century and later Jewish references which reflect Jewish observation that the face of a corpse distorts no later than the end of the third day after death. When reading the references below, disregard the actions of the soul that are expressed since they may not yet have been a part of Jewish belief in the first century. Also, whether the changes in the face in the references below are said to occur *only* on day three, *precisely* at the end of day three, or could occur on day one, day two, or day three, is not relevant. The only point relevant here is that the references below

reflect Jewish observation that the face of a corpse distorts *no later than the end of* the third day after death.

> Bar Kappara taught: Until three days [after death] the soul keeps on returning to the grave, thinking that it will go back [into the body]; but when it sees that the facial features have become disfigured, it departs and abandons it [the body]. Thus it says, "But his flesh grieveth for him, and his soul mourneth over him" (Job 14:22). (Mid Gen Rab 100:7. Written in the fifth century, Bar Kappara's tenure being around 200 C.E.)

> They derive testimony [concerning the identity of a corpse] only from the appearance of the whole face with the nose.... They give testimony [about the identity of a corpse] only during a period of three days [after death]. R. Judah b. Baba says, "[Decay in corpses] is not alike for all men, all places, and all times." (Mishnah Yebamot 16:3-4. Written in the second century. Note possible dissenting opinion from R. Judah b. Baba in addition to the three-day timeline that is clearly expressed.)

> R. Abba b. R. Pappai and R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi: For three days [after death] the soul hovers over the body, intending to re-enter it, but as soon as it sees its appearance change, it departs, as it is written, "When his flesh that is on him is distorted, his soul will mourn over him" (Job 14:22). Bar Kappara said: The full force of mourning lasts for three days. Why? Because [for that length of time] the shape of the face is recognizable, even as we have learnt in the Mishnah: Evidence [to prove a man's death] is admissible only in respect of the full face, with the nose, and only [by one who has seen the corpse] within three days [after death]. (Mid Lev Rab 18:1. Written in the eighth century. As already noted, Bar Kappara's tenure was around 200 C.E, as was the tenure of R. Levi)

We know today that distortion of the face is part of the process of putrefaction after death, which includes bloating of the entire corpse due to internal gasses but which *first* bloats soft tissues like the lips and eyelids of the face. Even though the time after death at which bloating begins is dependent on a variety of factors (mostly temperature), and there

are inaccuracies in the Jewish measurement of time (because they counted any part of a day as one day), the upper limit of three-days time for the bloating of the face described in these Jewish references is approximately confirmed by modern forensics.[24]

Given that the first outward signs of decay are distortion of the face and the accompanying foul odor from the building gasses of putrefaction, it seems reasonable to conclude that these signs would have in the first century been associated with *decay of the body in general*. We see this association — the belief that decay of the corpse in general begins no later than the end of the third day after death — in the expectation of odor from the tomb of Lazarus after three days: "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days" (Jn 11:39).

Early Christians would have made inferences from Ps 16:10 if such inferences were obvious and made sense to them. If, due to Ps 16:10, the early Christians believed that Jesus was raised before decay, and they also believed that the flesh of a corpse starts to decay no later than the end of the third day after death, it would have been a natural and automatic inference for Jesus' followers to conclude that Jesus was raised no later than the end of the third day after death. If the beliefs about the soul in the midrash references above (Mid Gen Rab 100:7; Mid Lev Rab 18:1) were present in first-century Judaism, and if it was understood from Ps 16:10a that Jesus' soul did not *go to* Hades (as noted in previous section), then this same three-day time period would have been further reinforced (i.e. the soul hovers over the body for three days, and since Jesus' soul did not *go to* Hades, Jesus must have been raised before the end of the third day). Even if the earliest Christians were not intentionally looking to answer *when* Jesus resurrected, which I do not think they were because that seems like such a minor issue, they could hardly have ignored a resurrection scripture that seemed to be telling them just that. As Bruce Metzger pointed out in 1957:

> It was believed that corruption set in on the fourth day after death....God had promised through the Psalmist (16.10) that he would not let his Holy One see corruption....[Therefore,] Jesus must rise *prior* to the fourth day.[25]

Raised *On* the Third Day

But how would a belief that Jesus was raised *by* the third day become the belief that he was raised *on* the third day? One possibility is just a slight simplification or linguistic shift in the tradition. On a common sense level, it would not be surprising for a circulated tradition about any event occurring *by* the third day to morph into the tradition that it occurred *on* the third day. Additionally, if the *on* the third day tradition was adopted into and spread through popular creed early on, which it was in this case, any previous tradition would be quickly displaced.

It is also possible that the shift from *by* the third day to *on* the third day occurred because of, or was further encouraged by, the friction between Ps 16:10's raised before decay time period and Jewish beliefs about *resuscitation*. Jews appear to have believed that resuscitation was possible up to the point that the flesh starts to decay, and therefore like decay, up to the end of the third day after death. This belief is reflected in the same midrash references mentioned earlier with their imagery of the soul intending to *reenter* the body up until the face distorts. A first-century Jewish association of resuscitation before distortion of the flesh is still reflected in these midrash even if the expressions about the actions of the soul were not yet a part of first-century Jewish belief, i.e. regardless of the believed *cause* of resuscitation, the midrash reflects practical Jewish experience with people that sometimes "came back to life" before they started to rot, but never after they started to rot. This is entirely expected given the misdiagnosis of death that sometimes occurs in any culture, especially ancient cultures. Jan Bondeson shows that before brain waves were measured, almost all cultures used the outward signs of putrefaction as the point up to which resuscitation was thought possible.[26]

As the Christians formed their beliefs, like any human beings they would have been cognizant of how others would perceive them. The appearance of resuscitation would have been a source of tension *unavoidably inherent* in the claim of someone raised before decay (or by the third day). Anticipation of or early encounters with the accusation or misunderstanding of resuscitation would have been a hindrance to Christians who wanted people to believe them, and wanted those people to become believers themselves. The inclusion of the word "buried" in the creed — "and that he was buried, and that he was raised" (1 Cor 15:4) — is an indicator that the earliest Christians were sensitive to the appearance of resuscitation. As N. T. Wright says, one of the reasons for the word

"buried" in the creed is "to certify that Jesus was really and truly dead."[27] Gerd Ludemann agrees: "The reference to the burial confirms the reality of Jesus' death."[28] In other words, the Christians were insisting that Jesus was really dead; he did not resuscitate after being removed from the cross. Although "burial" in the creed may close out any possibility that Jesus resuscitated, the resurrection tradition was probably not always circulated with the caveat that Jesus was buried. Therefore, sensitivity to the appearance of resuscitation may have pushed the tradition to the third day given that both day one and day two are dangerously close to and within only a couple of hours of Jesus' late afternoon death on Friday (day two began at sunset on Friday). (It is worth noting that if the Jewish belief that death was certain only *after* three days was the *only* determinant in when Jesus was raised, it would most likely have resulted in a fourth day or later resurrection belief in order to completely avoid the appearance of resuscitation.)

Why Was "On the Third Day" Included in a Core Creed?

It is understandable that a core creed would include the core belief that Jesus was "raised" and the core conviction that this belief was "in accordance with the scriptures". But why would a core creed include the *day* that Jesus was raised?

As already shown above, the "before decay" aspect of Ps 16:10 is *inseparable* from its core meaning that Jesus was raised. If Ps 16:10 was the only raised messiah scripture the earliest Christians had, or one of the most important ones they had (it is always near the top of any Christian list of resurrection prophesies even today), it would not be surprising if the "before decay" aspect of Ps 16:10 was included in a creed of core beliefs that was asserting that Jesus was raised in accordance with the scriptures. "Raised on the third day" may be a way of expressing that in a better known and more accessible way than the more technically correct "raised before decay". As Craig Keener says:

> If "third day" is included in "according to the scriptures," Paul may think of...Jonah 1:17; but his point may simply be that Jesus was raised before he could experience decay (Ps 16:10).[29]

As an aside, and as Keener suggests, Jon 1:17 may also have been in mind in the creed's assertion that the third day was "in accordance with the scriptures". It is worth asking on what grounds one can propose this given the following conclusion of the Jesus Seminar which would rule such an early use of Jon 1:17 out:

> Matthew [12:40] has interpreted the sign of Jonah [1:17] to mean the three days and three nights Christ is alleged to have spent in the bowels of the earth. Since Luke does not seem to know this interpretation [even though he refers to Jon 1:17 in Lk 11:29-32], we must assume it... is a Christian interpretation provided by Matthew.[30]

However, as noted earlier, Matthew's resurrection interpretation of Jon 1:17 is done *in public* while Luke does not have *any* public proclamation of Jesus' future resurrection. If, as suggested earlier, Matthew (or the tradition he drew from) broke the public silence about Jesus' future resurrection so he could post guards at the tomb, then the application of Jon 1:17 to Jesus' resurrection may not be a Christian interpretation original to Matthew, Matthew may just be the first to have a use for it in a narrative of events. In this case, Jon 1:17 may have been used by Christians as a scriptural allusion to Jesus' resurrection on the third day before Matthew used it in his gospel; hence, it could be in mind in the much earlier creed. Note however that Jon 1:17 cannot be the scriptural *origin* of the third-day belief because its "three nights" would have led to a fourth day resurrection.

Matthew's Use of Jon 1:17 Instead of Ps 16:10

If Ps 16:10 was the origin of the third-day belief, and if Matthew in his gospel intended a scriptural illustration of a messiah raised *on* the third day so he could post guards at the tomb (Mt 12:40), then why did Matthew refer to Jon 1:17 instead of Ps 16:10? This question is a splitting of hairs but is still worth looking at. If Jon 1:17 was in Christian use before Matthew used it in his gospel, then Ps 16:10 would have had no advantage over Jon 1:17 in terms of familiarity to Matthew or his audience. As indicated earlier when this question was addressed in relation to Hos 6:2,

one can only speculate what was going on in Matthew's mind. In comparison to Hos 6:2, it was suggested that Jon 1:17 lent itself better to the resurrection of a *single person*. In the case of Matthew's choice of Jon 1:17 over Ps 16:10 the answer may lie in how well each passage lent itself as a voice for the third-day belief. Although Ps 16:10 leads in an understandable way to the third-day belief, it does not lend itself as readily to the reverse process, that is, as a scriptural illustration (or sign) of a three-day time period. This is because Ps 16:10 does not *state* any time period, its associated time period is instead an inferred conclusion. Therefore, Jon 1:17's *stated* even though technically imperfect three-day time period, its singular person focus, and its captivity/release from the sea creature which lends itself well as a scriptural allusion to resurrection (burial/release from the earth), may have for Matthew made it a better scriptural sign than Ps 16:10 of a messiah raised on the third day. Summarizing the relationship between Hos 6:2, Ps 16:10, and Jon 1:17 from Matthew's perspective: Hos 6:2 is lacking as a clear scriptural illustration of a resurrected messiah, Ps 16:10 is lacking as a clear scriptural illustration of the third day, and Jon 1:17 is a mediocre illustration of both. Which would you choose if you were Matthew? If Ps 16:10 was the origin of the third-day belief, Matthew's use of Jon 1:17 instead of Ps 16:10 (or Hos 6:2) is not unexpected.

Conclusion

The Ps 16:10 theory can be summarized in simplest form as follows. Compelled to find scriptural confirmation for their belief that Jesus had been bodily raised up to heaven, Jesus' earliest followers were drawn to Ps 16:10. Believed to be written by King David, Jesus' followers interpreted Ps 16:10 as referring to David's messianic descendant instead of to David himself. Given Jesus' indisputable death but believing him raised, Jesus' followers also interpreted Ps 16:10 as referring to post-death rescue before decay, instead of the psalmist's originally intended poetic plea to avoid death. Since Jews believed that the flesh of a corpse starts to decay no later than the end of the third day after death, it would have been a natural and automatic inference from Ps 16:10 that Jesus was raised no later than the end of the third day after death. A slight linguistic shift, a simplification in a growing legend, or a sensitivity to the appearance of

resuscitation caused the tradition to become “on the third day”. “On the third day” is included in the creed because it captures in a well known and accessible way the inseparable “before decay” meaning in Ps 16:10’s prophetic prediction of a raised messiah. In short, the Ps 16:10 theory simply proposes that the third-day belief is a logical by-product of early Christian interaction with Ps 16:10.

It might be helpful to conclude with a summary comparison of the Ps 16:10 theory to the sacred third-day theory, where I feel there is some nuance that might not be easily noticed. First, it is easier to posit the Christian use of Ps 16:10 in the third decade of the first century than it is to posit a Jewish sacred third-day tradition at that time. Four things support this conclusion. One, the Christian use of Ps 16:10 has significantly earlier attestation in Acts than the sacred third-day tradition has in the rabbinic literature. Two, there are a lack of passages in Jewish literature contemporary with the New Testament which employ the sacred third-day motif. In contrast, the absence of Ps 16:10 from Christian literature before Acts can be reasonably explained. Three, Acts specifically says Ps 16:10 was used by the earliest Christians. Although an unreliable claim, it is more than can be said of the sacred third-day tradition which has no claim of Christian or Jewish use before the third century C.E. Four, Ps 16:10 would have been a very natural passage for the earliest Christians to have been drawn to.

A second nuance worth noting is that the Ps 16:10 theory explains better than the sacred third-day theory the lonely scriptural emphasis on the third day in the creed and the minimal interest in the third day’s scriptural significance elsewhere in the Christian literature. The third day was included in the creed not because the third day was itself scripturally important, but because the third day was an integral and necessary part of a much more important scriptural claim — that Jesus was raised.

Lastly, it seems more realistic from a human perspective that instead of the earliest Christians simply *assuming* that Jesus was raised on a sacred day without really any compelling need to make such an assumption, that they were unintentionally led to conclude that Jesus was raised on the third day because something of much greater importance — a raised messiah scripture — led them to that conclusion.

In conclusion, it is plausible that the Christian third-day belief came from Ps 16:10.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Meaning

This book set out to explain the causes of the beliefs and traditions in 1 Cor 15:3-7 from the perspective of experience-based doubt in Jesus' resurrection. The conclusion is that Christianity started off with a bang. Immediately after Jesus' obscure burial there was a swirl of rationalizations, individual hallucinations, collective enthusiasm, vying for positions of authority, and scriptural interpretation. The best example of similar extraordinary and rare events coming together in one place at the same time is the seventeenth-century messianic movement of Sabbatai Sevi. Eventually Jesus was deified in a way similar to, or perhaps in challenge to, several Roman emperors of the first century who were also called "son of God" (Tiberius, Nero, Titus, Domitian, and Gaius Octavius).[1] The belief that Jesus was the resurrected son of God was not a legend; it was an authentic belief and those who believed it were willing to die for that belief. From this belief grew the legends we see in the gospels. This book does not claim that all of this is demonstrably so, but it does claim that this is *one* plausible way to read the evidence. If this way of reading the evidence is correct, what other important questions and conclusions does it lead to?

In addition to the beliefs and legends that formed after Jesus' death, it seems like there had to be something else that caused Christianity to triumph over the Roman Empire's paganism and then go on to become a world religion. What was it? Perhaps part of the answer lies with Jesus himself.

Scholars have tried to navigate the legends of the gospels and other Christian literature to sift out a profile of the historical Jesus. One such profile comes from the Jesus Seminar. They conclude that Jesus was a sage of which there is little known about his public adult life except for the following basic sketch:

> [Jesus] regularly infringed the social codes in force in his society. He consorted openly with social outcasts, with "toll collectors and sinners." He did not observe kosher. He suggested that it was not what goes in to a person's body but what comes out that defiles. He did not practice fasting. He infringed the Sabbath codes on occasion. He did not observe other purity codes, such as washing his hands before eating.... As a final act, Jesus went to Jerusalem, either spoke or acted against the temple and the temple authorities, and was executed by the Romans.[2]

If this profile is correct, it appears that Jesus had in view a less class-based and less ritualistic Jewish God than was prevalent amongst other Jews of the time. We see an expression of and probably an improvement on these same ideas in Paul's letter to the Galatians: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). The key and novel idea here (which for Paul only applies to Christians) is that all are equal in the eyes of God.

But how do we get from these ideas to a religion that triumphed over paganism and then went on to become a world religion? Perhaps the best answer comes from sociologist and Pulitzer Prize nominee Rodney Stark. Before the growth of Christianity was carried forward by the political power it obtained in the fourth century, Stark suggests there was a steady and continuous growth of Christianity amongst the 4-6 million dispersed Jews who lived outside Palestine (which was about 80% of all Jews at the time). Most of these Jews had been assimilated to some degree into the Greek culture there (Hellenized); almost none spoke their native Hebrew language anymore.[3] According to Stark, their remaining Jewishness put them in a socially marginalized position of which Christianity offered a solution:

> Christianity offered many of the same things to Hellenized Jews that nineteenth-century Jews found in the [Jewish] Reform Movement.... A non-tribal, non-ethnic religion rooted in the Old Testament [the OT providing the familiarity and continuity], one that focused on theology and ethics rather than on custom and practice.... Christianity offered to retain much of the religious content of *both* cultures and to

> resolve the contradictions between them...it freed them from an ethnic identity with which they had become uncomfortable.[4]

Stark argues that Christianity also grew amongst pagans because it offered superior answers to the misery, chaos, fear, and brutality of Greco-Roman life. Christianity taught to love and treat others as yourself. This eased the burden of the homeless, impoverished, orphaned, and widowed. It eased relations between social classes, and improved the treatment of women and slaves. Christianity offered a more compelling concept of god, one all loving and powerful God, instead of the multiple smaller gods of paganism. Pagans were able to adapt these ideas through Christianity without all of the ritual associated with Judaism.[5] Stark concludes with what he sees as the "ultimate factor" in the rise of Christianity: "Central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations."[6] Stark goes on to say, "Christianity brought a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty...what Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity."[7] Given all of this, it is no wonder that Christianity spread amongst many Jews and pagans in the Roman empire, went on to become a world religion, and is still a cultural success today.

That key Christian doctrine mentioned earlier — equality before God — would go on to lead in a messy and sporadic way over many centuries, and often against a Christian status quo, to some of the world's greatest cultural advancements — the abolition of slavery, better treatment for women, and the rise of democracy as a form of government. Of course non-Christians were also a part of these liberty movements, people like Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the nineteenth century women's suffrage movement, Thomas Paine's denunciation of slavery in 1775, Ernestine L. Rose's activism in the women's suffrage movement and the anti-slavery movement, John Stuart Mill's influential doctrine of liberty, and Thomas Jefferson's lead role in the birth of modern democracy. However, it is impossible to separate these people from their upbringing and their surrounding Christian culture which was based on the concept that all are equal in the eyes of God. As conservative commentator Dinesh D'Souza says about the groups that led these liberty movements:

> These groups [over a very long period of time] gave a political interpretation to the biblical notion that all are equal in the eyes of God. From this spiritual truth they derived a political proposition: because human beings are equal in God's sight, no man has the right to rule another without his consent. This doctrine is the moral root of both abolitionism and democracy.... The Christian doctrine of human equality [before God] is the basis for all modern doctrines of human rights.[8]

Actually, to determine the real basis for all modern doctrines of human rights one has to determine what gave rise to the Christian doctrine of spiritual equality before God. Some might propose this concept was divinely inspired in Jesus and in the Apostle Paul. But if this book is correct that Jesus did not resurrect from the dead, it is difficult to maintain that this concept was any more divinely inspired than any other idea that comes through men. Also indicating more human mechanisms in the rise of this idea of equality before God is that similar or identical concepts of abstract human equality arose in other philosophical and religious traditions. For example, in the fourth century B.C.E. the Greek sophist Alcidamas said, "God has set everyone free. No one is made a slave by nature" (Messeniacus). Similarly, and also in the fourth century B.C.E., the Athenian poet Philemon said, "Though a man be a slave he is made of the same flesh as you. For no one was ever made a slave by nature; but chance has enslaved a man's body."[9] Although we do not know if Christianity was an influence, spiritual equality before God also appears in Judaism around 150 C.E.:

> Rabbi Judah ben Shalom said in the name of Rabbi Eleazar: It is the case by humans that if a poor man says anything, one pays little regard; but if a rich man speaks, immediately he is heard and listened to. Before G-d, however, all are equal: women, slaves, poor and rich. (Midrash Rabba, Parshat Beshalach)

Islam too, although it does not explicitly state the doctrine of equality before God, it strongly implies the same idea in its pilgrimage to Mecca where people of all color, rich and poor, kings and peasants, men and women, young and old, all stand before God together at their holiest

shrine. Buddhists of course could never imagine the concept of equality before God for the simple reason that they do not believe in God. But they could in the second century B.C.E. say, “Just as I am so are they, just as they are so am I” (Sutta Nipata 705, also annotated as Sutta Nipata 3.11).

I suggest that the roots of the idea of equality before God, which Jesus himself may never have articulated in the form of a “doctrine” like Paul did, was just simple human empathy. We see a codified form of empathy in Judaism as early as 1000 B.C.E.: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). We see it again in 180 B.C.E.: “What thou thyself hatest, do to no man” (Tobit 4:15). And again sometime between 30 B.C.E. and 10 C.E.: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah; all the rest of it is commentary; go and learn” (Rabbi Hillel, Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 31a). As the Jesus Seminar points out about the gospel’s rendition of Jesus’ statement to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:31), with its application in the parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-35): “The response Jesus gives is one any Judean faithful to his or her tradition could have given, had he or she been informed by Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of Jesus.”[10] In other words, Jesus was building on the ideas of others before and around him, or perhaps more accurately, Jesus was doing what Arthur Nock describes is the role of great prophets in society:

> The receptivity of most people for that which is wholly new (if anything is) is small.... The originality of a prophet lies commonly in his ability to fuse into a white heat [the] combustible material which is [already] there, to express and appear to meet the half-formed prayers of some at least of his contemporaries. The teaching of Gotama the Buddha grows out of the eager and baffled asceticism and speculation of his time, and it is not easy even now to define exactly what was new in him except his attitude. The message of John the Baptist and of Jesus gave form and substance to the dreams of a kingdom which had haunted many of their compatriots for generations.[11]

That the Christian movement was a human process that gave form and substance to empathy that was already there can be seen in the New Testament’s passages about slavery. Col 4:1 says, “Masters, treat your

slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (for other passages on slavery see: Eph 6:9; 1 Peter 2:18-21; Titus 2:9-10; Eph 6:5-8; Col 3:22-25; 1 Cor 7:17-24; 1 Tim 6:1-2). This admonition to treat slaves justly and fairly was revolutionary for its time, but it understandably presupposes the institution of slavery normal and acceptable. Even 400 years later, Christian leaders were forced to theorize, "The prime cause, then, of slavery is sin" (St. Augustine, The City of God, Book XIX, Chapter 15). Not until the middle ages was there enough cultural progress that the Pope started prohibiting slavery, but even then the only prohibition was against enslaving fellow Christians: "[A] sentence of excommunication [will] be incurred by one and all who attempt to capture, sell, or subject to slavery, *baptized* residents of the Canary Islands, or those who are freely *seeking Baptism*" (Pope Eugene IV, Sicut Dudum, 1435 C.E., emphasis added). After a few more centuries, objections to enslaving non-Christians emerged and Abraham Lincoln could say, "I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy" (Definition of Democracy, 1858). After 2000 years and a civil war we can now confidently reject Paul's kinder form of slavery and say that no one should ever be, nor should anyone have ever been, a slave.

Empathy in its socialized form — compassion — appears in almost every religious and philosophical tradition, not just the Judeo-Christian tradition.[12] For example, Hindus in 150 B.C.E. said, "One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to one's self; this is the essence of morality" (Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva 113:8). Confucius in 500 B.C.E. said, "Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself" (Mencius VII.A.4; see too Doctrine of the Mean 13). Buddhists in the second century B.C.E. said, "Hurt not others with that which pains yourself" (Udana-Varga 5:18). Zoroaster in 600 B.C.E. said, "Whatever is disagreeable to yourself do not do unto others" (Shayast-ne-Shayast 13:29). The Greek philosopher Isocrates in 375 B.C.E. said, "Do not do to others what would anger you if done to you by others." The Greek philosopher Epictetus in 135 C.E. said, "What thou avoidest suffering thyself seek not to impose on others" (Encheiridion). Mohammed in the seventh century C.E. said, "What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of human beings, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the sufferings of the

injured" (Sahih Bukhari). The stated purpose of the world's first known legal code in 1780 B.C.E. was, "... to cause justice to prevail and to ensure that the strong do not oppress the weak" (The Law of Hammurabi).

If the idea to treat others as you would want to be treated, and the idea of an abstract equality of all people, existed in many places around the globe at and before the time of Jesus, why was it Christianity that took these ideas the farthest? This is a great question. The factors which cause some cultures to actualize certain ideas better than other cultures are complex and beyond my scope here. I have a feeling that the cultural mechanisms involved are barely understood even by those who study them. However, an example of a different kind of cultural advancement, one in which the causes went undetected until a decade ago and not until after 30 years of research by one very curious individual, illustrates how huge cultural leaps can happen due to the most unexpected causes. In his best selling book *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond shows how those societies which first made the transition from hunter-gatherer to mass food production were catapulted thousands of years ahead of others in many other cultural aspects. The main advantages of mass food production were much larger populations, a germ resistant and carrying populace, and massive amounts of time freed up to invent things and to create societal hierarchies and organizations to efficiently direct the larger populace toward common goals. Diamond shows in excruciating detail how the transition to mass food production first occurred at those locations on the globe which simply happened to have the best selection of domesticable animal and plant species and the least geographic and ecological barriers to their spread. The Fertile Crescent was the first to make the transition to mass food production around 8500 B.C.E. Europe was next around 5000 B.C.E. The United States did not become a mass food-producing continent until the domesticated animals and plants of Europe were brought here by the Europeans (primarily cattle and a diverse suite of protein-rich cereals). Jared Diamond explains:

> It is striking that the areas of Native America without food production...are [today] some of the most productive farmlands and pasture.... The former absence of food production in these lands was due entirely to their local paucity of domesticable wild animals and plants, and to geographic and ecological barriers that prevented the

> crops and the few domestic animal species of other parts of the Americas from arriving.[13]

When the culturally advanced Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas and found the Indians living in the Stone Age, it is understandable that he attributed it to their lack of Christianity. But the lack of technological and societal advancements amongst the Indians, like those which made Columbus' voyage and his advanced society possible, were due almost entirely, if not entirely, to just simple geography. In sum, large cultural leaps can give the mistaken impression of a divine cause or lead to the mistaken conclusion that certain cultural benefits can only be obtained and sustained through a particular religious belief. This is faulty thinking.

This leads into what I think is a main concern for many people when the foundations of religion are questioned like this book has done. Although compassion is rooted in empathy, it is in conflict with our own self-centeredness. The prevailing wisdom is that the latter wins out without some kind of belief in God, or some kind of belief in a life after this one that is dependent on our actions here and now. As Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor said, "If there is no God, all is permitted". The same implied concern is expressed by Benjamin Franklin. Franklin cautioned an acquaintance who had just written a pamphlet arguing against the existence of God to not "attempt unchaining the Tyger, but burn the Piece before it is seen by any other Person.... If men are so wicked as we now see them with religion, what would they be if without it."[14] Even the late atheist/agnostic Carl Sagan noted:

> There is no human culture without religion. That being the case, that immediately says that religion provides some essential meat, and if that's the case shouldn't we be a little careful about condemning something that it desperately needed?[15]

That being said, I am not advocating here that there is no God or afterlife. I personally am agnostic on that and leave that up to God or whatever it is that happens after death. However, in defense of my atheist friends, I think their behavior is probably more of a mixed bag than the fears above let on,

just like the behavior of those who believe in God or an afterlife is often a mixed bag.

But if the effect of questioning religion is uncertain, why not leave well enough alone? Why write a book like this one? This is a good question that almost kept this book from being published and I am still not sure that I have an adequate answer. The only good reason I can think of is a belief in the benefits of truth. Christianity and other religions may bring enormous good to the world, but if this book is correct that Jesus did not resurrect from the dead then many people have a false understanding of Christian origins. False understandings have a way of leading to unfavorable consequences over the long term. We occasionally see these unfavorable consequences in the interaction between the world's religions due to their mutually exclusive religious claims. As former Prime Minister Tony Blair said in 2008, "Globalization is pushing people together and there is a danger that religious faith pulls them apart."[16] And as former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said in 2006:

> The wars between Catholics and Protestants that had claimed the lives of one-third the population of Christian Europe had been brought to a close in 1648 by the Peace of Westphalia. Large-scale fighting between Christians and Muslims had ceased when, in 1683, the advance of the Ottoman Turks was halted at the gates of Vienna. I found it incredible, as the twenty-first century approached, that Catholics and Protestants were still quarreling in Northern Ireland and that Hindus and Muslims were still squaring off against each other in south Asia; surely, I thought, these rivalries were the echoes of earlier, less enlightened times, not a sign of battles still to come. Since the terror attacks of 9/11, I have come to realize that it may have been I who was stuck in an earlier time. Like many other foreign policy professionals, I have had to adjust the lens through which I view the world.... Some commentators suggest that the importance of religion is overstated and the only truly relevant issues are economic.... But history tells us that strongly held ideas, whether enlightened or misguided, matter more.[17]

It has been said that how one orients toward religion defines one's "total-worldview", that is, it defines what one believes about the world

around them at a fundamental level.[18] Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? Our total-worldview structures our experience and interpretation of the world around us and forms the lens through which we see everything else: politics, economics, education, relationships, science, values, etc. We tend not to question our total-worldview once it is established, and those with different total-worldviews often appear as evil, stupid, or crazy. The non-religious are not immune, for their orientation toward religion also forms a total-worldview. In short, humanity is and always has been stuck in a quagmire of conflicting total-worldviews.

The accepted answer to this age old problem is tolerance. Madeleine Albright suggests, “Know your faith at its deepest and richest best, and enough about your neighbor’s faith to respect it.”[19] She also suggests, “If hard-liners can find in the Quran and the Bible justifications for endless conflict, I believe others can find overriding commandments to pursue the opposite.”[20] Tony Blair in 2008 started a “Faith and Globalization” initiative aimed at finding common ground between religions and using faith as a source of reconciliation.

These are all worthy steps that should be continued, and probably most people practice their traditions in just this way. But there is a limit to the reconciliation that such measures can bring amongst more fundamental believers and on issues where values come into conflict. For example, in our country there is no reconciling a Christian who wants the Bible’s creation story taught in public schools and the public school’s decision not to. Such parents often go to a private school if they can afford it, and so too would a secular minded parent if the situation were reversed. It is not surprising that some propose we scrap our public school system and essentially segregate into schools that are consistent with our total-worldviews. Likewise, there are fundamental irreconcilable differences which cause a twelve million member church to tell their young people “not [to] take the chance of dating nonmembers... one cannot afford to take a chance on falling in love with someone who may never accept the gospel.”[21] It should be no surprise if twelve million non-members of that church respectfully reach the same conclusion of incompatibility. There is an irreconcilable and radical difference between a scientist trying to raise public awareness and funds for studying the risk of a giant meteor strike, and a caller in to a radio program who tells him that if God is going to let such an event happen there is nothing we can do about it.[22] These two

total-worldviews have been at odds in many scientific inquiries. There is no reconciling someone who thinks God prohibits homosexuality and is therefore against any legal or social status that legitimizes gay couples, and those who agree with former vice president Dick Cheney that "people ought to be free to enter into any kind of union they wish, any kind of arrangement they wish."[23] One can hardly blame a non-Christian soldier for questioning the wisdom of going to Iraq when he hears the president respond to a reporter asking if his father thinks the war is a good idea with, "You know, he is the wrong father to appeal to in terms of strength. There is a higher father I appeal to."[24] On the other hand, a Christian might think that such divine consultation, or at least being a Christian, is a minimum requirement for the person in the oval office. As Madeleine Albright says:

> A student of both science and ethics, [Thomas Jefferson] drafted his own version of the Gospels, omitting the miraculous parts, such as the Virgin Birth and the resurrection. It is hard to imagine a political leader in our time doing anything similar. Even then, Jefferson received a pummeling.[25]

Most of the time our differences in total-worldviews just separate us. But sometimes they are a source of tragic conflict. While tolerance goes a long way towards dealing with these problems, the real long term solution to our differences in total-worldviews may be more along the lines of what Madeline Albright suggests when discussing the Israeli-Palestine conflict:

> Ordinarily, when diplomats sit down to negotiate a border, they come equipped with maps, and with suggestions for compromise.... Productive conversation stops, however, when the parties argue for the rightness of their positions not on the basis of human laws and precedents, but on the basis of the promises and intentions of God.... If negotiations do again become practical, traditional diplomacy will be indispensable, but something more may also be needed: a convergence in our appreciation of what God really wants.[26]

I would go even one step further and say that over the long term what we really need in this world is more convergence in total-worldviews, i.e. more convergence in that primary lens through which we see everything

else. Toward that goal, this book has tried to convey to others what the founding event of a total-worldview different from my own looks like to me. That is all anyone can do. In my view, the founding event of Christianity is human equality, not resurrection. Additionally, and based on the evidence I am so far aware of, my experience-based doubt leads me to conclude that none of the world's religions has been founded by a divine event and none has access to the infallible will of God. If true, then one of the biggest tasks for humankind over the long term is to put their myths in proper perspective while at the same time finding societal relationships that foster human empathy, its socialized form to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and its institutionalized form, equal human rights. We would leave behind some of our divisiveness and move forward with the common understanding that whether God exists or not, we have only our own fallible hearts and minds to determine our destiny.

Appendix: Myth Growth Rates

One major topic that impacts on the historical reliability of the gospels is the rate at which myth or legend can grow and overcome historical events in the literary record. Some argue that the gospels cannot be mostly legend because even if they were not written by people close to the actual events, and even if they do draw on common oral or already written traditions, the myth growth rate would be implausibly high given their relatively early composition in relation to actual events. For example, William Craig says, "One of the major problems with the legend hypothesis... is that the time between Jesus's death and the writing of the gospels is just too short for this to happen."[1]

I think this argument is key for many people who try to assess the historical reliability of the gospels. It was the "clincher" for Lee Strobel, a layman who investigated the resurrection of Jesus, converted to Christianity, and then wrote a best selling book about it (*The Case for Christ*):

> I had wanted to believe that the deification of Jesus was the result of legendary development in which well-meaning but misguided people slowly turned a wise sage into the mythical Son of God.... But while I went into my investigation thinking that this legendary explanation was intuitively obvious, I emerged convinced it was totally without basis. What clinched it for me was the famous study by A.N. Sherwin-White, the great classical historian from Oxford University, which William Lane Craig alluded to in our interview. Sherwin-White meticulously examined the rate at which legend accrued in the ancient world. His conclusion: not even two full generations was enough time for legend to develop and to wipe out a solid core of historical truth.[2]

Strobel and Craig are referring here to a 1960-61 lecture series by the late A.N. Sherwin-White. In the last part of his eight part lecture series, after carefully qualifying himself as an "amateur" in New Testament

studies, A.N. Sherwin-White argued that there should be a basic historicity in most or all of the gospel traditions based on his experience with other ancient literature that "even two generations [60-70 years] are too short a span to allow the mythical tendency to prevail over the hard historical core of the oral tradition."[3] When one reads Sherwin-White's entire treatise on gospel reliability carefully, there is no doubt that he considered the gospels to be generally historically reliable.

However, a question was posed to Sherwin-White at the time by a just as prominent classical historian from the same university, Peter Brunt. Brunt's question appears to have come after the lecture series ended because Sherwin-White only addresses it in a footnote appended to the very end of the 1963 written record of his lecture series. Sherwin-White's footnote reads:

> Mr. P.A. Brunt has suggested in private correspondence that a study of the Alexander [the Great] sources is less encouraging for my thesis. There was a remarkable growth of myth around his person and deeds within the lifetime of contemporaries [circa 300 B.C.E.], and the historical embroidery was often deliberate. But the hard core still remains, and an alternative but neglected source — or pair of sources — survived for the serious inquirer Arrian to utilize in the second century A.D. This seems to me encouraging rather than the reverse.[4]

Sherwin-White is saying here that determining the historical core from the legendized records of Alexander the Great would have proven very difficult or impossible if not for the survival of a less legendized source (or pair of sources) to guide the later historian. Sherwin-White is correct to say that his convention of historical inquiry still holds true in this case, but its meaning is different than what many people may initially think. Given Sherwin-White's response above, his convention of historical inquiry is really this:

> When in some quarters the mythical tendency *does* prevail over the hard historical core of the oral tradition in the first two generations, there will *always* survive another less legendized source or sources to guide the later historian.

This I think gets to the heart of the matter. Who would have written an unbiased or only slightly legendized account of Jesus' life? Unlike Alexander the Great, who was the king of Macedon, and everyone else that Sherwin-White uses for comparison in his book — Pisistratus (tyrant of Athens), Hipparchus (tyrant of Athens after Pisistratus), Gaius Gracchus (politician), Tiberius Caesar (Emperor), Cleomenes (King), Themistocles (military commander), and all 46 people in Plutarch's *Lives* (every single one being a statesman, general, king, emperor, lawmaker, politician, tyrant, or consul) — Jesus was not a figure of contemporary significance when he was alive or to anyone but his worshippers for a century or two after his death. Because of this, it seems entirely plausible that we could be dealt only highly legendized pieces of literature. In short, I think Sherwin-White is simply mistaken; less legendized sources may not *always* exist for the later historian to look at.

As an aside, although Sherwin-White appears to have had in mind a significant amount of historical core when he stated his convention of historical inquiry — "even two generations are too short a span to allow the mythical tendency to prevail over the hard historical core of the oral tradition" — he has worded his convention too generally to be of any use. The "hard historical core" in the literary evidence may only be that Jesus lived, had a following in Palestine around 30 C.E., and was crucified by the Romans. Everything else might be legend. This would still be consistent with Sherwin-White's stated criteria because the myth did not "prevail" over this hard, even though minimal, historical core. One wonders if behind Sherwin-White's lack of specificity in how much historical core will survive was the realization that this problem is not so easily pinned down.

This brings us to another deceased scholar that is sometimes invoked today in support of gospel historicity based on myth growth rates. In 1836, Julius Müller issued the following challenge to David Strauss after Strauss wrote a highly controversial book which included the proposal that the gospels were mostly legend:

> Professor Strauss doubtless supposes that the thirty years which might perhaps be found between the death of Christ, and the composition of the oldest of our Gospels, are sufficient for it [the rise of significant myth]. But we must regard his opinion as groundless,

> unless he gives proof, that within thirty years, on a clear historical scene, not strange fables, — for thirty years are not requisite for that, — but a grand series of legends, the most prominent elements of which are fictitious, have anywhere gathered round an important historical individual, and been firmly fixed in the general belief.[5]

Before getting to Strauss' response, it is first worth repeating Sherwin-White's comment above about Alexander the Great: "There was a remarkable growth of myth around his person and deeds within the lifetime of contemporaries." This so nearly meets Müller's challenge as to make it almost moot. Here we have a "remarkable" series of legends that gathered around Alexander the Great within 30 years after his death ("within the lifetime of contemporaries"), just as Müller is demanding. As Sherwin-White also pointed out in his earlier comment, these myths about Alexander the Great were still alive 500 years later when Arrian was writing history in the second century, and so they were most definitely from a long term standpoint "firmly fixed in the general belief", the other qualification demanded by Müller. If one wanted to use a shorter term definition of "firmly fixed in the general belief", such as the initial popularity of the legends, then one has to consider how popular Christianity was at its beginnings. Sociologist Rodney Stark suggests the same growth rate for early Christianity as has been observed in modern times for Mormonism: 3-4% per year. Based on this, there need only have been 1000 Christians in the year 40 C.E., and like any compound rate growth curve, it starts off very slow and does not get big until much later. There would have been only 1400 Christians in 50 C.E. and 7500 Christians in 100 C.E. From there the numbers get significant — 217,000 in 200 C.E., 1 million in 250 C.E., and 6 million in 300 C.E., this last figure matching other literary and archaeological data.[6] Even if there were spurts of mass conversions, it is unlikely that the earliest Christian beliefs were any more popular or any more "firmly fixed in the general belief" than the Alexander the Great legends.

That significant legend can develop very rapidly and be believed by many people in a community even with eyewitnesses still around there should be no doubt. First-century Roman historian Tacitus described the social situation in his day:

> That everything gets exaggerated is typical for any story.... [All] of the greatest events are obscure — while some people accept whatever they hear as beyond doubt, others twist the truth into its opposite, and both errors grow over subsequent generations.[7]

In 425 B.C.E., the Greek historian Herodotus reported traditions that were already circulating from the Persian wars just 55 years earlier. These traditions included a temple that magically defended itself with animated armaments, lightning bolts, and collapsing cliffs, a sacred olive tree that grew an arm's length shoot in one day, a horse that gave birth to a rabbit, and a mass resurrection of cooked fish.[8] As Richard Carrier says, "[It was] an age of fable and wonder, where magic, miracles, ghosts, and gods were everywhere and almost never doubted."[9] Gershom Scholem notes the rapid rise and widespread belief of legends in the *very first year* of the seventeenth century messianic movement of Sabbatai Sevi:

> ... legend developed and spread at an amazing speed... by the autumn of 1665... fiction far outweighed the facts... the believers moved in a dizzy whirl of legends, miracles, and revelations.... The transition from mere factual reality to the transfigured reality of the heart, that is, to legend, was rapid. Collective enthusiasm quickly surrounded events with a halo.[10]

As the Sabbatai movement continued to gain momentum, the legends that emerged included a fiery cloud encompassing the prophet with the voice of an angel coming from the cloud, the claim that the prophet had discovered the ashes of the sacred red heifer which had been hidden away until the end times, drops of oil spontaneously emerging from Sabbatai's head, all Christian churches sinking into the ground, great stones falling from heaven onto places of gentile worship, Sabbatai killing a band of attacking robbers with words, Sabbatai walking through fire unharmed, Sabbatai resurrecting some who had died years earlier, prison chains breaking and prison doors opening by themselves, lepers being healed, supernatural travel capabilities, and Sabbatai ascending into heaven when he was arrested while the archangel Gabriel assumed his form.[11] Another example of rapidly growing and widely believed legend is the WWI

legend of the Angel of Mons, which developed over a period of just months. According to Alan Coulson:

> Under the stress of national crisis, fact and the supernatural were blended together in a myth — not a superstition, but a part-factual, part-fictional explanation of disconcerting threat and reassurance that the danger would pass. This myth was not tested scientifically; it was not analyzed; it was just accepted.[12]

Arthur Machen, the author of the fictional story that unintentionally contributed to the rise of the Angel of Mons legend would later write, "The snowball of rumor was set rolling until it was swollen to a monstrous size."[13]

The lack of ability of eyewitnesses to keep up with and constrain the growth of legend, or to even try, is probably what causes many stories to "take on a life of their own". David Strauss reflected on this aspect of eyewitnesses when he proposed that the gospels were mostly legend:

> [It is] very incomprehensible, replies the objector, how in Palestine itself, and at a time when so many eyewitnesses yet lived, unhistorical legends and even collections of them should have been formed.... [But] who informs us that they [the legends] must necessarily have taken root in that particular district of Palestine where Jesus tarried longest, and where his actual history was well known? And with respect to eye-witnesses, if by these we are to understand the Apostles, it is to ascribe to them absolute ubiquity, to represent them as present here and there, weeding out all the unhistorical legends.[14]

There may not be an example of a person who has been legendized to the full degree that Jesus has, but we are not talking here about an everyday occurrence and in everything there is always a biggest and best. But it turns out there is a good explanation that makes sense of the extra legendization surrounding Jesus, and it comes from Strauss himself who responded to Müller's challenge in the 1840 reprint of his book. Recognizing that the *amount* of legendization was the only substantive part of Müller's challenge, Strauss replied:

> A frequently raised objection remains... the objection, namely, that the space of about thirty years, from the death of Jesus to the destruction of Jerusalem, during which the greater part of the narratives must have been formed... is much too short to admit of the rise of so rich a collection of mythi. But, as we have shown, *the greater part of these mythi did not arise during that period, for their first foundation was laid in the legends of the Old Testament*... so that for the period between the formation of the first Christian community and the writing of the Gospels, there remains to be effected only the transference of Messianic legends, almost all ready formed, to Jesus, with some alterations to adapt them to Christian opinions, and to the individual character and circumstances of Jesus: only a very small proportion of mythi having to be formed entirely new [emphasis added].[15]

In conclusion, and like so many of the other issues surrounding gospel reliability, myth growth rates do not at all preclude the possibility that the gospels are mostly legend.

Endnotes

Introduction

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[7] Wilhelm Bousset (1913) as quoted by Rudolf Bultmann (1976) and then Gerd Ludemann (1994) in Gerd Ludemann's book, *The Resurrection of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1994), 116-117. See too Michael J. Cook, "Jews and Gospel Dynamics," *The Fourth R* 22.2 (Mar/Apr 2009): 13.

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[6] William Lane Craig, “Was Jesus Buried in Shame? Reflections on B. McCane’s Proposal,” *The Expository Times* 115 (2004): 405; see too Num 11:31-34; Ezek 39:9-16.

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[4] Ibid., 53, 54, 214; see too pgs. 57-59, 69.

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[22] National Public Radio, Jan 7, 2005, “Science Friday” segment.

[23] National Press Club Speech, Washington D.C., June 1, 2009.

[24] Albright, *Almighty*, 160.

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[26] Ibid., 129, 141.

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[4] Ibid., footnote 2 on pg. 192-193.

[5] Julius Müller, *The Theory of Myths in Its Application to the Gospel History Examined and Confuted* (London: John Chapman, 1844), 29. Photocopies of this nearly extinct book, which was originally published in German in 1836, can be obtained from the rare books department of Cambridge University Library in the UK. This challenge appears to have been brought to the surface again in 1981 by William Craig (“[Müller’s] challenge has never been met”) in his book *The Son Rises: Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 102.

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